

PRIDE

機密ファイル

kamipro編集部 編

封印された30の計画

PRIDEを買収したロレンゾ・フェッティータの野望/幻となったMMAワールドシリーズ構想/DREAMは「PRIDEライト級GP 2008」から生まれた/「PRIDE.1」は高田vsヒクソン、桜庭vsヘンゾだった/高田vsヒクソンの前座に前田日明登場!/?長州力、橋本真也、船木誠勝の参戦計画/ホイスvsケアー消滅の裏側/PRIDEが小錦獲得に動いた!/?高田延彦引退試合の相手は小川か吉田だった/PRIDEに“赤いパンツのタイガーマスク”登場/桑田佳祐vs小川剛がPRIDEで実現?/早すぎたリアリティショー計画/ミルコへの宣戦布告だったミルコvsヒーリング/曙に対抗する“地球”ホリフィールド/大晦日に「サクマシム」デビュー/PRIDEとUFC、本当の関係/幻のUFC日本進出計画とミルコとの関係/“皇帝”ヒョードルを二度破った男/ハイアンvsスティーブ・ボクセの仁義なき闘い/永田裕志が高田延彦にガチで挑戦状/PRIDE武士道は「PRIDEサバイバル」だった/ブル・マスカラスによる横やり/ビッグバン・ベイダーのPRIDE参戦/中軽量級は『武士道』存亡の危機から生まれた/『武士道』日本テレビで放映計画/タイソンvsミルコ、ヒョードル、メゲイラ/実現寸前だった五味隆典vsボクシング世界王者・徳山/GSP、キンボ・スライスはPRIDEに上がるはずだった/最後の夢 桜庭和志vs田村潔司

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PRIDE – Secret Files



Men among men, step up! (Nobuhiko Takada)



Pro-wrestler Nobuhiko Takada's call for the "strongest" had him facing Rickson Gracie, the Jiu-jitsu fighter undefeated in 400 matches, under Vale Tudo rules. PRIDE, built to set up such a forbidden big project.

And later, the legendary bout between Kazushi Sakuraba and Royce Gracie. The showdown at the summit, Fedor Emelianenko vs. Mirko Crocop. The match of judo champion destiny - Naoya Ogawa vs. Hidehiko Yoshida. The start of the middleweight era with Takanori Gomi vs. Tatsuya Kawajiri. The PRIDE GP to decide the "one in six billion, the strongest man in the world," etc., one after the other, amazing matches were made reality.

The promotion company Dream Stage Entertainment, using their name just as it is, created a dream stage.

However, in PRIDE's ten year history, while there were plans put into action, there were also movements to make other plans reality but that didn't see the light of day; there were a number of phantom cards and phantom projects.

Those phantoms up until now had not been told to anyone, buried in the darkness, the fact of their ever having existed was sealed away. But, for PRIDE which is no longer, there is no reason to keep secrets any longer.

In this book, those unknown PRIDE secret files will now be revealed to the public.

If those matchups had been made reality at the time, the history of MMA might have been changed forever.....

PRIDE was precisely that hugely influential and equally humongous project.

PRIDE – Secret Files

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Notes from the translator

First of all, thank you all once again, and by that I mean all those that donated to have yet another translation project come to fruition. I will continue to translate more Japanese MMA books as long as there are MMA fans around to support the time and effort it takes. MMA is possibly the greatest sport in the world, and Japanese MMA was the pinnacle of the sport for many years, so being able to read about those years, those fighters, those events in English is, I think, to capture an important part of history. And let us hope the future of MMA is even brighter, including Japan.

This book was somewhat easier to translate than Sakuraba's book in that it is mostly a dry presentation of facts, so there is less worry about having people's voices come through, their styles of speech, and so on. It was also twice the length of Sakuraba's book, which presented its own problems. And of course, there were the numerous interviews throughout the book.

In order to help keep the flow of the book the way that it felt to me while reading it, I had to make a few compromises. First, normally, in a professional translation, a translator has to choose a specific word or a specific phrase that is equivalent in meaning, and put only that word or phrase on the page. In some places, I have given loose or simple translations to words or phrases that don't exist in English and have included notes on the original Japanese. As well, I have added some Japanese cultural notes for references that might be lost on

Western readers. This time around, I have also included Wikipedia links where available for quick reference.

Also, past, present and future work somewhat differently in Japanese than in English. I decided to use mostly Japanese tenses as I had in Sakuraba's book, and I hope the changes in tense are not too abrupt for English readers.

I have chosen to keep people's names the same way in which they are referred to in the book ("Mirko Crocop" for Mirko Filipovic, "Mauricio Shogun" for Mauricio Rua, etc.).

This book likes to refer to plans that never came to be as "phantoms." The image seems to be that they never materialized, staying behind as immaterial ghosts that haunt the history of PRIDE. I have left those references as is, the ghosts of PRIDE.

I have also chosen to leave words in quotation marks as is. In Japanese, a sentence like, "Won-his-previous-fight-and-became-champ-but-lost-the-belt Mirko went on to..." works perfectly well, so it was most efficient to keep the quotes and just change the sentence order around. I apologize for any unnaturalness. Other times, the author used them wanting to create a key phrase or to express the mood of the fans.

I have tried to end rhetorical questions with periods and real questions with question marks to keep them separated. I have also kept the times when the

book includes a large number of periods, often used in Japanese to leave a thought trailing off, to get the reader to complete the sentence or to use their imagination to see what the author is talking about. Maybe it will help the reader to be taken back, to reminisce about the glory days of PRIDE.

Thanks, and please enjoy the book.

MMA Translations

<http://mma-pride-book.blogspot.com/>

and please also visit:

<http://www.mixedmartialarts.com>

<http://nightmareofbattle.com/>

Chapter One

Phantom PRIDE FC worldwide

March 27, 2007, Tokyo, at the Roppongi Hills¹ arena, there was a press conference for the fans which had been labeled as an "extremely important message press conference."

At this press conference, with DSE's CEO² Nobuyuki Sakakibara, PRIDE General Director³ Nobuhiko Takada and a number of PRIDE fighters were in attendance, and UFC owner Lorenzo Fertitta and UFC President Dana White took the stage. There, it was announced that DSE CEO Sakakibara would step down after the April 8, 2007, PRIDE 34 event, and Lorenzo Fertitta would become the new owner, and a new company, PRIDE FC Worldwide, would undertake the operations of PRIDE.

At this press conference, Lorenzo stated, "I will continue to love the UFC and PRIDE as my two children."⁴ At the press conference, the day after PRIDE 34 ended, it was announced that from the May 20 Saitama Super Arena event, they would hold the PRIDE lightweight GP 2007. However, just about five days later on April 14, the new company, PRIDE FC Worldwide, announced that the lightweight GP was postponed.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roppongi_Hills

² Mr. Sakakibara is listed in various places as DSE CEO, president, head, acting president, etc.

³ Mr. Takada is given a long Japanese title, mostly for appearance, that can translate as General Overall Chief or something similar. I have used "chief Takada" generally.

⁴ This and many other quotes are translated from English or another language into Japanese and then back into English. If possible, I have gone to the source to get a direct quote.

And from there, without a word of news, six months later, October 4, the PRIDE FC Worldwide Japan main office was suddenly locked up. Just before PRIDE could have celebrated its tenth anniversary, the last nail was driven in.

The new PRIDE that went nowhere. What kind of plans were there behind the scenes. In Chapter One, first, we would like to close in on the mysterious end of Lorenzo's PRIDE plan.

File 001

The real aim of Lorenzo Fertitta, the man who sealed PRIDE's fate

March 2007, Lorenzo Fertitta purchased PRIDE and took over its management rights. Also the owner of the UFC, he announced at the press conference, "The UFC is like my baby, and now I have another and I love both just the same," but in the end without even having held a single "new PRIDE" event, they closed up the Japanese office in October of the same year. This was the real death knell of PRIDE.



PHOTO - November 2003, UFC owner Lorenzo Fertitta (left) and UFC president Dana White (center) and Randy Couture came to Japan to observe the PRIDE Tokyo Dome event. You can see Lorenzo's infatuation with PRIDE from his PRIDE GP t-shirt.

Was the real reason Lorenzo bought PRIDE to kill it off or did something occur that became a reason that it had to be shut down? As for Lorenzo's real aim, let us first go deeper.

Lorenzo and the original PRIDE owner, Nobuyuki Sakakibara, are in the middle of a dispute. On the first of February, 2008, PRIDE FC Worldwide Holdings LLC, which the brothers Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta had established, sued Nobuyuki Sakakibara and Dream Stage Entertainment.

According to the complaint made at the Clark County court in Nevada, "the formers owners of PRIDE did not make effort to adhere to the conditions in the contractual agreement that bound the purchase" (in the complaint, the strongest point of contention is the matter of a background check).

Lorenzo's side is claiming for return of the money already spent in the purchase, rejection of any further payment, and "exemption from the responsibility for maintaining PRIDE," contending that the other party's behavior constitutes fraud. Against this, Sakakibara's side has countersued, claiming that the contractual obligation to continue PRIDE has been breached.

The start of this buy-and-sell drama came in July 2006, just after Fuji TV dropped PRIDE from its live broadcasting. That year in October, PRIDE made its first move into America, holding their Las Vegas event. As PRIDE's CEO at that time, Sakakibara left for America to make arrangements for the event. On that occasion, he met with the Fertitta brothers, Lorenzo and Frank, and UFC president Dana White for a discussion.

That is when Lorenzo first came to Sakakibara with talk about purchasing

PRIDE. The captivation Lorenzo felt seeing the match PRIDE had put on between Kazushi Sakuraba and Royce Gracie is what got him into the MMA business in the first place (at that time, he purchased the UFC from SEG who was running it then).

He wanted to make PRIDE, the organization that captured his yearning, into his own, he wanted to make it bigger than it already was. According to the rumors, he presented some billions of yen [some tens of millions of US dollars], but at that time, Sakakibara, deep down the road of self-sufficiency, refused.

And not just Lorenzo, Sakakibara had received offers from a number of investors in the US for outright purchase or simple investing in PRIDE, but having ended in failure in trying to reacquire television broadcasting for the organization, it came to be that he finally made the sale to Lorenzo. He likely figured that Lorenzo, as the owner of the UFC, and as a fellow companion in the promotion business, could avoid any needless trouble and would have the power to help to secure MMA in its own right.

The announcement of the official transfer of the company happened on March 27, 2007, at the Roppongi Hills arena's event space, with them renting that space from morning until evening, basically an entire half-day renting out a severely competitive and sought after event space at the most competitive time of day. Adding in the travel expenses for the American side of the show, it likely came out to be a 300-million-yen [\$3.3M USD] press conference, all of which Lorenzo paid himself.

Lorenzo's vision of a "new PRIDE" certainly spread, but the dark cloud

from the previous television problems still hovered above. Dana explained, "For PRIDE, which costs about 1.2 billion yen [\$12M USD] to put on a single show," running it without backup from a television station would be impossible. So, one could suppose that is how PRIDE ended up never getting back to its feet. That is Dana's explanation.

However, for PRIDE, for the UFC, you cannot just simply walk in and get a television show. For a television station, there is the content section that handles arranging the timeslots, there is the sales section to amass sponsors. A television programme is made through coordinated work extended over a mass of different sections. And for that to happen, there has to be a lot of speculating.

In connection with being able to get your show broadcast on television, probably the most major matter is the background check. The 100 million yen [\$1M USD] paid for that was worthless. Lorenzo, paying that much of a fee, was turned down in the background check due to the management transparency requirements in the casino business he runs⁵.

If you look at it from the point of view of the Fertittas, to have to drop their core business by losing their casino license in order to run PRIDE, which was basically just an investment for them, is really a nightmare situation. As well, according to their explanation, it is clear from the court documents that it was not just the background check but also the asset assessment that had

⁵ The book was purposefully vague on these details, though I suppose public records in English are or will be available.

brought about problems.

“From April 2007 (the time of purchase), the information on the deposits, payments, records of money collection, client/customer information, transaction reports, bank balance statements, etc. has not been furnished, and further, physical obstruction has occurred.”

Because of that, it is explained that operations became extremely difficult. However, it is not possible at all to be satisfied by this explanation. If you are running a casino business, giving priority to the background check is all the more expected, it is a matter of common sense and of routine. As for the asset assessment as well, paying a rather enormous amount of money to purchase PRIDE, one could also point out the question of why they did not carry it out before the purchase.

On this matter, Dana White’s words are backtracking. The background check comes into view as the reason for suing. The story of, “Did Lorenzo really plan to continue PRIDE?” comes as well.

Most people in the business and in the media believe “PRIDE hadn’t been sold to Lorenzo, but in the end, to the UFC,” but if that is really the case, no matter in what form, the possibility for PRIDE’s return would have been high. That is because if Dana White and Zuffa, inc. financed PRIDE FC Worldwide, the “new PRIDE,” as its executives, they could not but work out positive, proactive corrective measures.

Shortly after, Lorenzo and his people started to hire PRIDE’s athletes to fly the flag in the UFC. And on October 4 at 10 a.m., a meeting was held at the

main Japanese office for PRIDE FC Worldwide, where they received an international call from president Jamie Pollack stating that the main Japanese office of PRIDE FC Worldwide would be locked shut and all of its 20 employees are dismissed.

And for the employees who were given that notice, dumbfounded, with no time at all, with president Pollack's representation and lawyers present, he told them they had 20 minutes to vacate the premises. And there was no contact made from America to any of the fighters under contract with PRIDE.

Failing in trying to get television broadcasting, the asset assessment, background check, transfer of the fighters, rewriting and transfer of the contracts..... Just one reason why PRIDE vanished cannot possibly be picked, but maybe it is because Lorenzo was captivated by the strongest MMA brand in history, PRIDE, and rushed into the deal without tying up all the loose ends beforehand. But afterward, the blaring errors, miscalculation of the Japanese market, misunderstanding of the television industry's interests, and the absorption into the UFC..... PRIDE has lost the Japanese market's support, and in America, just the UFC alone is fine.

PRIDE lost its place in the gulf between the US and Japan. After all is said and done, it had become too big for itself. It became a monster uncontrollable by any hand.

File 002

The origin of DREAM – the PRIDE Lightweight GP 2007

Sold to Lorenzo Fertitta, turned into “American capital,” on April 8, the deal was finalized, DSE gave up the reins on PRIDE, and a new start was coming under the control of PRIDE FC Worldwide. Many of the staff from DSE transferred into this new company, and the event itself would not change much, it was pledged it would still be a “fever⁶” event..... well, that is the way it was supposed to be.

The beginning of the “new PRIDE” was the lightweight GP. In 2004, the heavyweight, in 2005, the middleweight, in 2006, the open GP. Everyone involved including the fans as well were all aligned in their desire for the lightweights to come next.

And just with that, the lightweight battles started to become reality around that time. The strongest point of interest was that all of the champion Japanese fighters were getting in there.

⁶ Another word used in Japanese meaning hot, exciting, appealing to hardcore fans, etc.

This lightweight GP 2007 event was not just planned but was actually already officially decided to be put on. The opening bouts would take place at Saitama Super Arena on May 20, the semifinals "2nd Round" on July 16 at the Nihon Gaishi Hall (formerly Rainbow Hall) in Nagoya, and the finals once again at Saitama Super Arena on September 30. The event schedule details had been worked out that far.

As for the May 20 opening bouts event, tickets even went up for sale at the PRIDE fan club, official website and official cell phone website. A list of participating fighters had also been set in stone. The defending champion Takanori Gomi, previous semi-finalist Hayato "Mach" Sakurai, along with Tatsuya Kawajiri and Mitsuhiro Ishida. The foreign fighters were Gilbert Melendez, Joachim Hansen, Luiz Azeredo and Marcus Aurelio. As well, it was announced that PRIDE's main lightweight fighters were planned to participate.

One other matter making waves was the fact that rising star Shinya Aoki, who had been fighting in PRIDE since the previous year, racking up win after win with brilliant submissions, would be participating in it as his first GP.



PHOTO - What turned out to be the last event for DSE, the July 4 "PRIDE 34." The "PRIDE Lightweight GP 2007" was officially announced at the press conference the day after the event, but it was canceled one week later. But the torch was passed and "DREAM Lightweight GP 2008" took its place.

On April 13, Satoru Kitaoka and Fabricio "Pitbull" Monteiro fought in the DEEP ring, which had been cooperating with PRIDE, to decide who would enter the lightweight GP. In addition, one thing that cannot be overlooked is that some slots in the tournament were being left open for UFC fighters.

At the time when the GP was heading into its start, former owner of PRIDE and president of DSE, Sakakibara, when answering a question from the media, commented, "Without question, we will be seeing some top level fighters appear." There were rumors that two of the UFC's top welterweight fighters, Georges St-Pierre and Matt Hughes, and at that time lightweight champion Sean Sherk were candidates.

However, while these moves were being made before the purchase, and even the new owners had given the OK to the plan, to really put it into action, there just wasn't enough time. The PRIDE purchase (transfer of management rights) was officially announced on March 27. From there, PRIDE 34 was taking place on April 8, with the month after that slated for the start of the "new PRIDE" GP. This schedule was overly ambitious.

The time is during the transfer from DSE PRIDE to PRIDE FC Worldwide, from Sakakibara's organization to the Fertittas' organization, the point where all of the rights were being transferred. While the contract was already signed, the odds and ends left to be cleared up before it would be official were

numerous. To hold back-to-back events in April and May during all that would have been asking too much.

There was no mutual consensus from the Japan and US sides on the GP announcement. First, the Japanese side had their staff doing the producing and they made the announcement when Sakakibara gave the green light. From the point of view of the Japanese staff, with the new company (shifted to America) leader having yet to be announced, there was no point really in going back and forth with the American side about it.

Polishing up the plan. Sakakibara doing the double-checking. But word from the American side was late, late, late... For the Fertittas and the UFC, it seems the idea was, "we have agreed to the GP plan, but we would like to do it after our organization has been firmly set up." But putting on the GP had already been announced.

The time for preparations was short, the time for advertising was short. A series of releases would have to be made immediately or the likeliness of success of the event would plummet. With no response still from the American side, the staff announced the GP schedule and the planned participants.

But the stance of the Americans until the end would be, "events should be put on after everything has been put in order on the business side of

things." And on April 14 (that is, the day after Satoru Kitaoka secured his place in the GP), the GP's postponement was announced.

The Fertittas' opinion was to "proceed with the transfer duties, and because there is only one month to prepare for the May 20 event, there isn't sufficient time with production and promotion to put together our first PRIDE event as one that will satisfy the fans."

A press release under the name of DSE stated, "To make our first event as great as can be, we have decided to postpone it." And with this arrived not only the postponement of the GP but the closing down of the Japanese offices.

And the lightweight GP ended without even having started. However, in March of the following year, the original PRIDE staff and FEG formed the new event DREAM together, and the first event they produced together was a lightweight GP. This is the lightweight class that PRIDE had polished up, the Grand Prix stage they had in their hearts, they pushed into reality. The GP ended up showing PRIDE's sharpened knives, Aoki, Kawajiri and Ishida, becoming a sight to behold.

PRIDE Fighters' Unknown Stories 1

Shinya Aoki

"Before appearing in PRIDE, while I was at police college, an offer came from the UFC to fight B.J. Penn."



PHOTO - Aoki Shinya. May 9, 1983, born in Shizuoka prefecture. Started judo in his elementary school days, made many accomplishments, chosen as a star athlete at the 2002 Japanese Juniors, etc. Started jiu-jitsu during his college days, making his pro debut in DEEP. Became Shooto World Middleweight Champion in February 2006. Fought first in PRIDE in February 2006 at PRIDE Bushido 12. Fought four times, finished his opponent four times. Was a semifinalist in the 2008 DREAM lightweight GP. The chameleon of the MMA world. 180 cm [5'10"], 70 kg [154 lbs].

Interviewer: Thinking about what to ask Shinya Aoki about, it has to be PRIDE.

Aoki: Yeah.

Interviewer: Before fighting in PRIDE, you had become the Shooto⁷ World Middleweight Champion while you were in college, then right after, you joined the police college in order to look for work. You were temporarily moving away from MMA, weren't you?

Aoki: Yeah, it was like at some point I just quit (laughing).

Interviewer: As such a top athlete in the sport, what made you move toward the career track?

Aoki: There were a bunch of reasons, but first was that I was thinking this is a world in which you've gotta eat to live⁸.

Interviewer: Have to eat... So, you were a college student that was fighting [in MMA on the side]?

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooto>

⁸ The standard Japanese way of expressing “get by” or “make a living” is something like, “This is a world in which you have to eat to live.”

Aoki: Right, in one way, MMA was just an interest. As well, I'd heard that the guys at the top were making money, but I'd been told, "Going into MMA to make money is bad." (laughing)

Interviewer: Maybe if you hadn't thought like that there would've been some things you couldn't do?

Aoki: Yeah, there was probably something of that, too. I didn't have money either, so at the time I guess I kinda took a break from MMA. I mean, it's sad, I was thinking, "Going like this, I won't be able to eat." Because, somehow, standing at the top after becoming the Shooto middleweight champion, I realized that I wouldn't be able to support myself by doing MMA. Even if my parents were rich, or owned a gym, that's not all, I didn't have the resolution to make sacrifices and fully commit myself.

Interviewer: But at that time, PRIDE Bushido and HERO'S came along, events that could feed a fighter, right. Didn't you think that you'd like to try fighting in them?

Aoki: To be honest..... I did want to try. But at the time, my feeling of "want to try" seemed to be desperately waning. At that time, I didn't even go to watch a PRIDE event.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

Aoki: Before fighting in MMA, I had always been watching it. But after I had actually gone in and did it, I stopped watching. That really was a conflict. Hasegawa (acting president) from the Koubudo⁹ wasn't around to help me, either.

Interviewer: Hasegawa, you mean your manager. So, you mean, you didn't have anyone to consult with.

Aoki: Yeah. But, I didn't try. I was really conflicted.

Interviewer: I see. So, when you became champion in Shooto and addressed the audience saying, "I won't ever fight anywhere but Shooto," that was a shout rooted in your hardships?

Aoki: Yes. But at that time, I was still a child in a lot of ways. So, the PRIDE Bushido events made me an adult. Bushido taught me about how to think as a professional, it showed me that if I try, that I can eat fighting in MMA.

Interviewer: Entering the PRIDE Bushido ring meant some culture shock, didn't it?

Aoki: It was a pro event in any way you want to think about it. Even down to the staff, they do as much as they can to make sure that the fighters can concentrate in the ring. Like, they gave us food money, we didn't need to

⁹ <http://www.koubudo.co.jp/> (Japanese only)

prepare our own ice or water for a bout, and the arena is huge, and also, you come into your locker room and there's food and drink left there for you, there was not a single point of trouble. Seeing how perfectly everything was done there, the first time I was in shock. Like "what am I, a feudal lord?"¹⁰
(laughing)

Interviewer: You made your feudal lord debut at Bushido? (laughing)

Aoki: But for that you were also required to do a lot. There was winning of course, and keeping the excitement going for the fans, making professional speeches, asking for me to perform. In that way, they helped me to gain independence as a pro athlete. It made a huge impact. I thought, "Can you make a living in MMA?" "You can make a living in MMA!"

Interviewer: Before fighting in Bushido, you quit the police, right? Is that because you decided you were resolved to make a living in MMA?

Aoki: I thought "I have to make a living."

Interviewer: Did you have worries?

Aoki: Yeah. A ton.

Interviewer: What made you make that decision?

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sengoku_period

Aoki: First, even if I became a cop, I wanted to continue training judo. I wanted to aim for the Olympics. But my MMA-era personal history came in, and I was unable to compete in judo.

Interviewer: Ah, the pro judo world is strict, isn't it.

Aoki: I thought it was probably okay, but when I entered the police, I found it was absolutely not going to happen. That was a real shock.

Interviewer: And that made you think about your future.

Aoki: You know, even if it wasn't MMA, I wanted to do something in the fight world. And then, while I was in police college, an offer came from the UFC.

Interviewer: To the police college (laughing).

Aoki: It went through a foreign associate of mine. The appearance fee they offered was about XX dollars. They said my opponent would be B.J. Penn.

Interviewer: A B.J. Penn fight for XX dollars?

Aoki: I calculated the pay after taking taxes and all out and I figured that if I could fight four times per year, I could somehow pay the bills.

Interviewer: Wow. So, the UFC made its offer, it must've seemed that you could make it as a pro, right?

Aoki: Yeah, that's what I thought.

Interviewer: So you have to feel grateful to the UFC (laughing).

Aoki: Yeah. Dana White, thank you! (laughing)

Interviewer: Dahahaha. But it was the first time you were recognized as a pro.

Aoki: I don't know if that recognition was a good thing or a bad thing but I did think, "They're going to give me this much!?" If it's going to be this much, it'll be alright. I can do it.

Interviewer: If you'd realized sooner, I wonder how it would've...

Aoki: Nah, if I'd realized sooner, it probably would've turned out bad. Besides, at that time, I had a lot of people around me to teach me competition and ideas, but there was no one to teach me that I could make a living in MMA.

Interviewer: To speak in extremes, an MMA fighter can't do much outside of fighting in a ring.

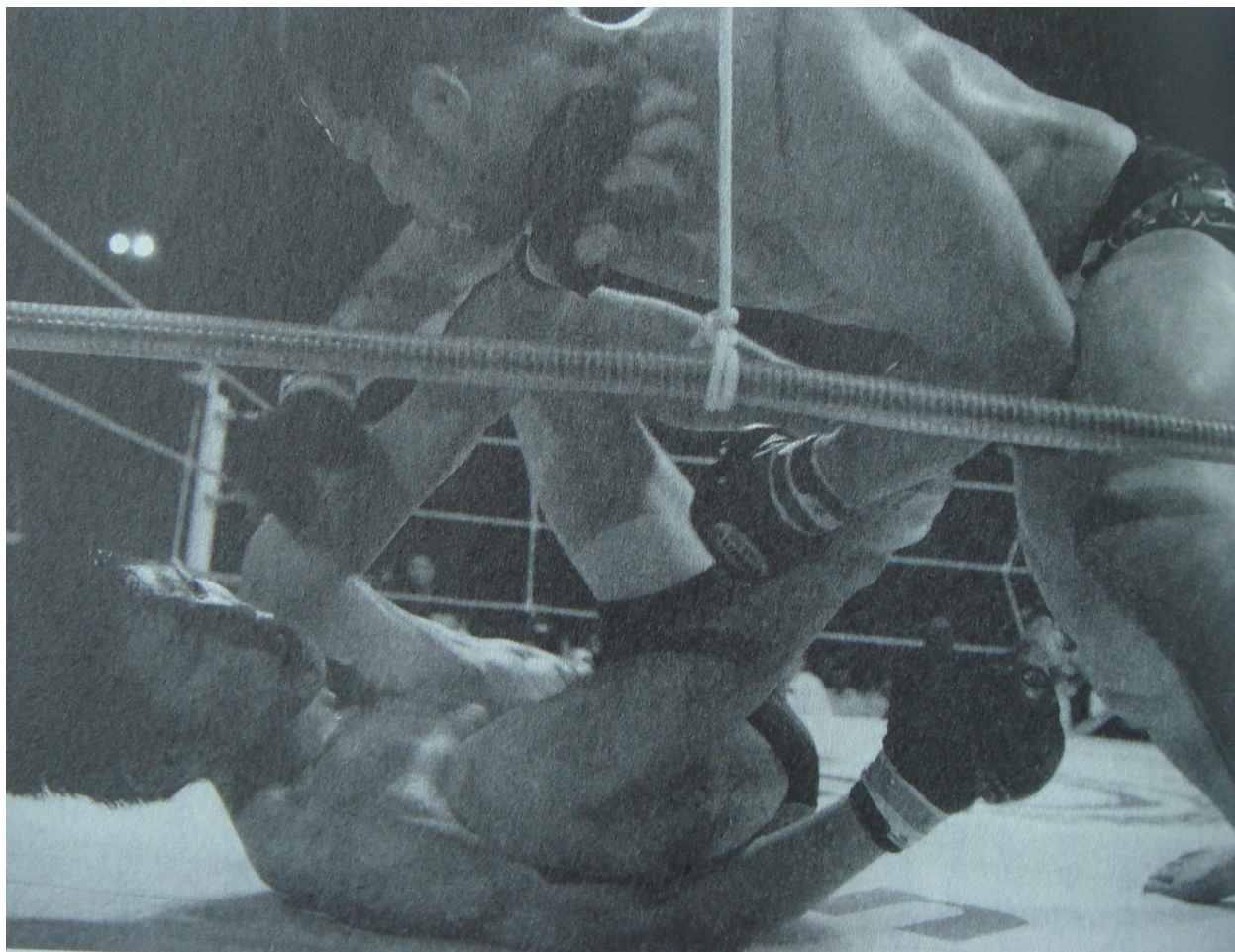


PHOTO – August 2005, before competing in PRIDE, Aoki fighting against the legend Hayato “Mach” Sakurai. This time, he lost by decision, but fighting against such a legend, PRIDE fans took notice.

Aoki: Right. There was no one that could do a good job dragging me to something else. So, meeting Hasegawa from the Koubudo was a really big thing. I had also consulted with him about the UFC deal. I said, "This kinda offer came from the UFC. I'm thinking of going." He gave me advice saying, "Wait a second. You, that ain't right. If a fighter is doing it all the way he should be doing it, there's a better road to take. You should deliberate carefully on this. You should avoid just going to America and simply putting your name on a contract." If I had just gone without thinking and fought in the UFC, I don't think I would've ended up polished into a pro.

Interviewer: That was dangerous.

Aoki: If Hasegawa hadn't been there, it woulda been. I might not've appeared in PRIDE and I wouldn't have become who I am now.

Interviewer: The Shinya Aoki story that continues from today got its start in Bushido, didn't it.

Aoki: I had first seen Bushido in June. And Ishida (Mitsuhiro) who had become champion about the same time as me was being showered in the limelight. At the Shooto event where I'd become champion, Kawajiri (Tatsuya) got kicked in the balls by Joachim Hansen and was squirming on the ground and he was becoming a superstar! (laughing)

Interviewer: Were you jealous?

Aoki: I was jealous! I was like "What about me!" So when it was decided I'd fight in Bushido, I remember I was asked by someone if money was my motivation, and I said, "Money's also important!"

Interviewer: Hmm. The people that watch the fighters demand a kind of stoicism. The reporters build up thoughts and ideas as they like and expect the fighters to sacrifice themselves to fit that, right?

Aoki: That's the thing I hate most!

Interviewer: If a fighter says it, that's one thing, but...

Aoki: That's just imposition of your thoughts, so I don't think it's right. It's like, it hurts, I think. I mean if every day you are doing stoic things and training, that in itself will make you want to eat, right? You have to sleep, you have to eat, and then you can train. I'm not asking for anything more than to do that.

Interviewer: That's about how the people around the fighter will support him...

Aoki: And that is how the ring called PRIDE was, they thought about the fighters. That isn't whitewashing. I mean, there is no one that says, "I work. I don't need money." That isn't philanthropic work. We're doing it as a job so we want something for it. Even if it's just to get enough to eat, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. And with that comes risk, pressure. Some fighter

says about guys like me or like Kitaoka (Satoru)¹¹, "those guys can even train during the day" but that's like, "and do you know what pressure we have on us to be able to do that?"

Interviewer: That's the pressure of a pro's life. It doesn't get into the dimension of how receiving a fee is good...

Aoki: Yeah, the attitude of a pro. For example, my disqualification win in the first J.Z. fight is probably the easiest ruling to understand. But it's a huge tournament, and you can't decide who the winner is based on the contents of that kind of fight. The audience won't accept it. I understand that. So, we had to fight again the next month, so ten days after that I'm already on the verge of our second fight. (laughing)

Interviewer: If you talk about the good and bad in PRIDE, you could raise that sort of overuse of the fighters as one of its bad parts, right?

Aoki: Hmm, there were times where right before the match, your opponent gets changed, but I don't think that I was being used. I'm not sure there were any particular bad parts.

Interviewer: Well, if a PRIDE fighter says so (laughing).

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satoru_Kitaoka

Aoki: They gave me security and a means to live so I think that way. It is my personal opinion, though.

Interviewer: You hear often that Japan's entertainment industry [of which MMA is a part] isn't as well maintained as it is in other countries. What do you think about that?

Aoki: But, Japan has its issues and America should have its own difficulties. So, enough, really.

When I'm asked about putting the emphasis on entertainment or sport, it makes me wanna take a shit (laughing). If you just focus on sport, it gets boring, you lose TV, the sponsors go, and then if the fighters can't eat, then what'll happen?

Interviewer: The balance of entertainment and sport, right.

Aoki: As long as MMA doesn't move away from its essence, I'm okay with it. Building your name up just by fighting weaker guys, you know, as long as you don't do that. You have to become a guy that can dance until morning. I don't care about if there's a weight difference or we're the same size. When people talk about the bad parts, they usually mention huge weight differences or TV personalities getting in the ring, right. What's the big deal, I don't think there's much that can be done about it anyway. Maybe that's kinda sad, that it's a TV actor that gets more seats filled at the arena. So before you complain about

that, as a fighter, you have to get more people talking about you than about him.

Interviewer: I'm asking just on the off chance but would the ideal ring for you be one without large weight differences and with plenty of time for you to prepare for the matches and without celebrities getting in the ring?

Aoki: So I'm told.

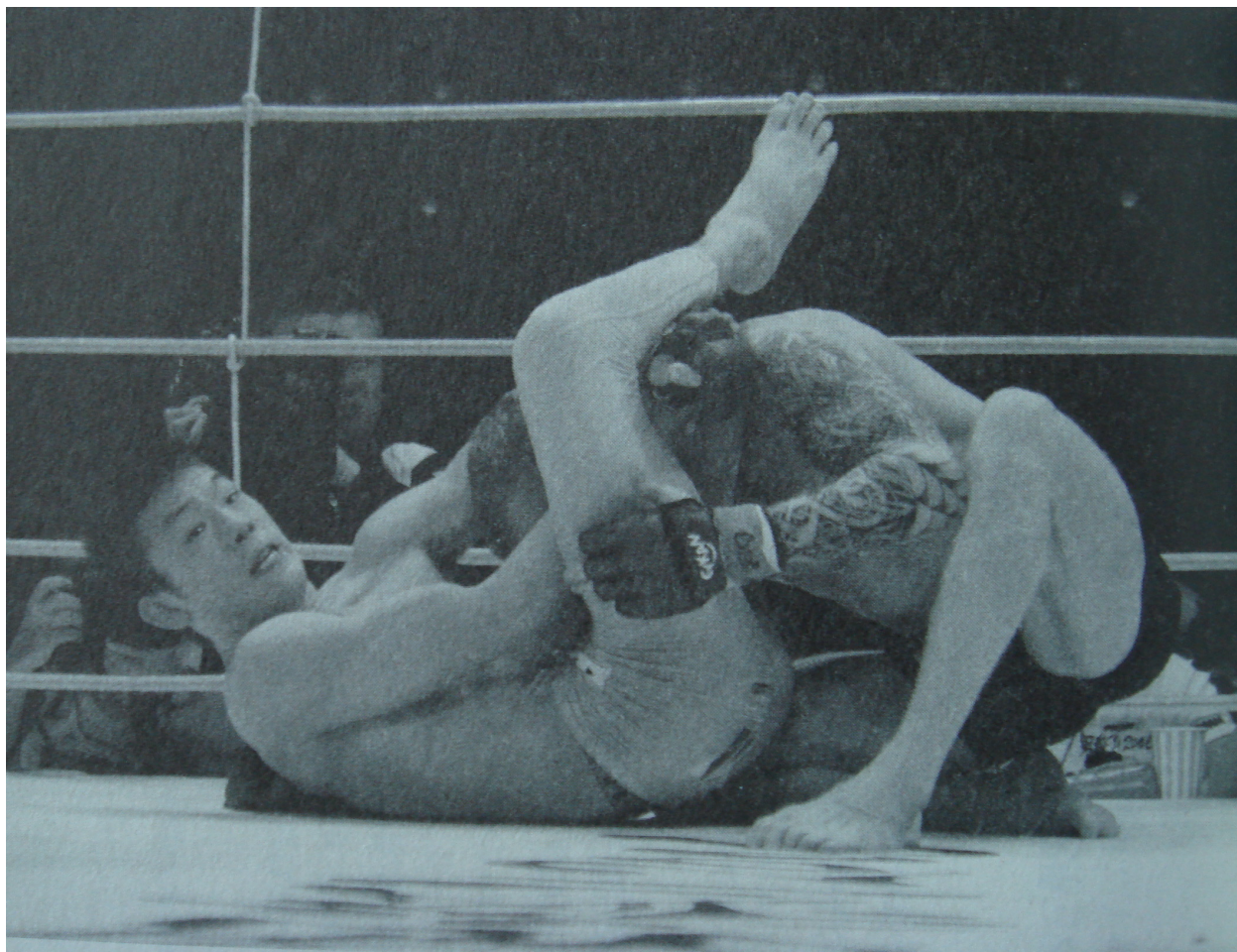


PHOTO - December 31, 2006 "PRIDE Otoko-matsuri 2006"¹² Shinya Aoki, fighting against Joachim Hansen, wins by gogoplata! Securing a technique of the future on star Joachim at "Otoko-matsuri" has a huge impact, this win raised the feelings of expectation toward Aoki, and it wouldn't be going too far to say this is what connected him with DREAM.

¹² The Japanese name for PRIDE's New Year's Eve events. Translates as "Man Festival" or "Festival of Men."

Interviewer: That's not the ultimate ideal?

Aoki: It's not. I mean, it's boring. Even being made to fight slowly¹³ in MMA is boring.

Interviewer: And well, everyone loves the reality of it.

Aoki: Japan has a pro-wrestling culture, and I think it is interesting if pro-wrestlers fight in MMA. So then what's wrong with having TV personalities do it too? It becomes a hot topic and gets more people into MMA which is the greatest thing, right? There's always injury, but no one ever died in PRIDE or even got severely injured. It's safe to a large extent.

Interviewer: So are there no bad parts?

Aoki: If you can call it bad that Fuji TV¹⁴ dropped the live broadcasts then that was bad. And there were sudden jumps in the fight money, but that didn't really have much to do with me.

Interviewer: The heavy and middleweight classes, right.

Aoki: Yeah, I fought in PRIDE after Fuji left.

Interviewer: That didn't have much to do with you, either, then (laughing).

¹³ Kachikkachi – stop-and-go, slow, mechanical/robotic pace, heavy traffic, etc.

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuji_Television

Aoki: Yeah, nothing to do with me. My PRIDE started after Fuji TV left. So it hurts when people talk about the competition. We survived, we can fight.

Interviewer: You're the epitome of the PRIDE dark-days fighter.

Aoki: The "new PRIDE" ended up going nowhere, right. Every day, you have no idea what's going to happen. That time was the absolute hardest. I really wonder what's going to happen.....

Interviewer: Because of that time, you became the "able to dance until morning" Shinya Aoki.

Aoki: Right! There wasn't even a place to dance during that time. So if you got a chance even just to dance you had to be grateful.

Interviewer: Returning to an earlier talk, but do you think MMA is becoming more sport?

Aoki: Isn't it enough of a sport now?

Interviewer: Well, establishing itself as a sport like judo...

Aoki: Isn't it okay if it doesn't? I want to do MMA that's like pro-wrestling. The organizations that have the same way of thinking about MMA that I have are PRIDE, DEEP, Yarennoka!, and the one I fight for now, DREAM.

Interviewer: What kind of way of thinking is that?

Aoki: A setup where the fighters think of the fans first, and the organizers take care of the fighters. That was really PRIDE. There was trust, and a feeling that they looked after the fighters, and they would even ask for us to matchmake, even if there might've been some risk.

Saeki (Shigeru, DEEP¹⁵ president) (sometimes passing by): Then will you fight in DEEP?

Aoki: That'd be great. The first explosion for 2009 in DEEP would be good.

Saeki looks well after me, and if it's for the sake of him and the PRIDE staff, I'll do anything! (laughing).

¹⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_\(mixed_martial_arts\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_(mixed_martial_arts))

Chapter Two

The Birth of PRIDE – Pro-wrestlers’
Dream Stage

October 11, 1997, Tokyo Dome. The biggest-bout-ever main event between Nobuhiko Takada and Rickson Gracie in PRIDE 1.

This event which largely acted to change and expand the mat¹⁶ world of Japan and push MMA (Vale Tudo) to the forefront was put on by KRS (Kakutougi¹⁷ Revolution Spirits), an organization in the form of an executive committee comprised of a number of people from industry.

Coming as they did from the outside, they were not influenced by the "mat common sense" of the day which allowed them to make dream matches one after another into reality. From that was born cards including the second Nobuhiko Takada vs. Rickson Gracie bout, Kazushi Sakuraba vs. Carlos Newton, Alexander Otsuka vs. Marco Ruas, etc.

It was an era still without a strict set of rules, with every event and each operation an experiment, in which they lured fighters one after another, with the world changing from a pro-wrestling one to an MMA one, leading to a new era for the likes of Sakuraba, Alexander and other pro-wrestlers.

¹⁶ Japanese includes traditional tatami mats used in judo, wrestling mats, the pro-wrestling ring, the octagon, boxing rings, etc. into the category of "mats."

¹⁷ An abbreviated form of the Japanese word for MMA (sougoukakutougi), also meaning "fighting arts." The "sougou" portion means "mixed" as in synthesis, coordination, integration, composite, etc. These synonyms appear in a lot of Japanese MMA merchandise, team names, etc.

However, as it was just the dawning, if we look coolly from the present, there are some things that maybe should not have been made into reality, dream stories made into plans¹⁸.

In this chapter, we will introduce some unheard-of plans from that dawning era.

¹⁸ The idea of a fantasy being better than actually acting it out.

File 003

“PRIDE 1” Renzo vs. Sakuraba planned alongside Rickson vs. Takada

Nobuhiko Takada vs. Rickson Gracie, the main event, was the main premise for the show but the problem was in putting together the undercard. Among the various proposed bouts was a fight that, rather than saying that it might have changed MMA history, would have made the history that actually happened after that about three years too late. That was Kazushi Sakuraba vs. Renzo Gracie.

When Rickson accepted, there was the possibility of having other members of the Gracie family all compete in one event – those members being Royler and Renzo. If that had happened, a theme of “XX vs. the Gracie family” as a plan would naturally have come. In the planning stage, the “XX” part would be replaced by “Japanese pro-wrestlers” and famous wrestlers would be boldly called out, but, it goes without saying, they were unable to make it happen (explained later).

At this time, the candidates to fill in the “XX” were wrestlers associated with UWF International¹⁹. If their General²⁰, Takada, could align UWF

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UWF_International

²⁰ "Generalissimo Takada" in HUSTLE.

International and Kingdom²¹ against the Gracies, more of a rivalry could be built up.

Kingdom started to allow punches to the face with open-finger gloves, etc., making it clearly more MMA-like than U-Inter, so Kingdom's Yoji Anjoh, Hiromitsu Kanehara, Kazushi Sakuraba, etc. were all good possibilities. And Anjoh was the perpetrator of the impactful event of storming the Gracie dojo, where he was defeated by Rickson Gracie.

If he would step into the same ring that Rickson would be stepping into, the heat of the event would rise to a boil, and who was the candidate to face Sakuraba, a Japanese pro-wrestler that had recently started to rise in MMA and was making a name for himself? The name raised was none other than veteran Renzo Gracie.

So, the staff started negotiations. On the KRS side was Sakakibara and on the Kingdom side, president Kenji Suzuki, who had been there since the U-Inter era. Sakakibara went to Suzuki, trying to make it work with all his might, and asked if he would allow anyone to appear in the event, but the answer he got was a no. We don't know whether this conversation made its way to the fighters or whether they never heard about it. That is, whose will was behind the answer of "no" to the fighters participating? But this is shrouded in mystery, and besides, thinking about how things played out later, it is hard to believe that it was the fighters who refused to fight. And with that.....

²¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_\(professional_wrestling\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_(professional_wrestling))

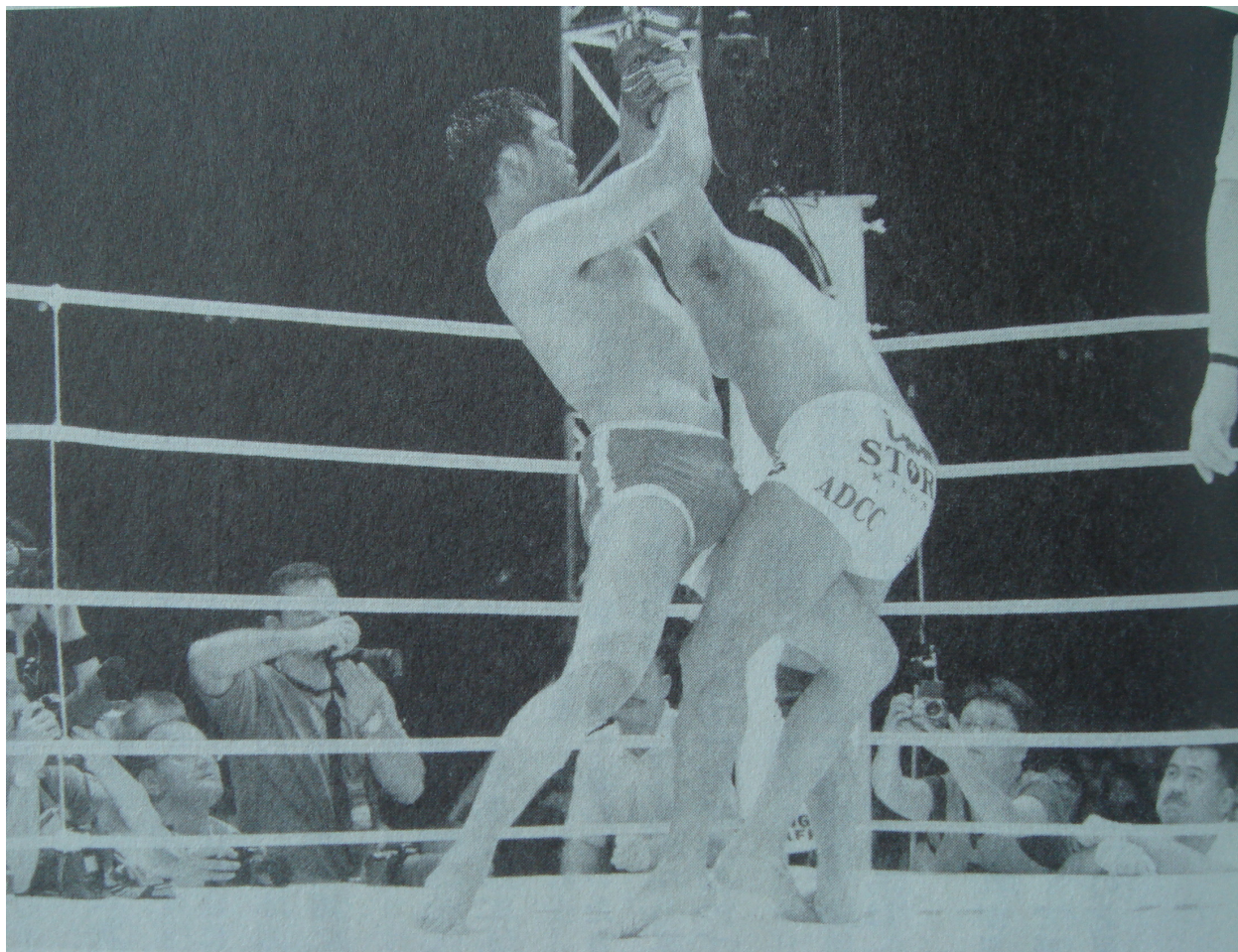


PHOTO – August 2000, PRIDE 10, Kazushi Sakuraba vs. Renzo Gracie made reality. A truly unbelievable finish, Sakuraba broke Renzo's arm with a standing armlock. If this had happened at PRIDE 1, MMA history would surely be different.

In any case, as the negotiations broke down, the undercard was stuck on a reef. The matchmaking couldn't be done, but still, they had to start working to gain exposure. At the press conference held in Roppongi, two people that weren't in the plan at that time, Akira Shoji and Kazunari Murakami, were in attendance, and as well for some reason, they posed with "image girl" Kaori Ohara, picking her up in their arms.

The leading part in the press conference was somehow taken over by Kaori. Yoji Anjoh's name and photo were printed among the planned participants in the press materials, but in the end, he didn't appear in the flagship first event due to inevitable circumstances. Looking at this as well, it seemed that they were running around in frantic desperation.

While the plan for the formation of a concept card fell through, they started working, trying a number of different routes to get a fire started for a new card. The new card ideas would vacillate from hot to cold again and again. One of the biggest issues to occur was the drawcard Tank Abbott vs. Kimo bout. The two fighters, having become popular in the UFC as real brawlers, were to clash. It would have been an absolutely forceful battle, but Abbott was unable to come to Japan, causing another bout to turn phantom.

Abbott's stand-in, Dan Severn, was also a big name in the UFC, but the Kimo-Severn match only left a mark for its mediocrity. Viewing the ring showered with booing, the staff all scowled, wearing faces like they had been chewing on insects.

KRS was made up of people from all different directions, and this brought about an unexpected side effect. One member was able to get Koji Kitao, who had also matched against Takada in U-Inter. With that connection and having

also appeared in the UFC as a “big-shot Japanese,” the participation of Kitao wasn’t unexpected, but it did have a quality to get people talking.

So, the fighter who did in reality end up fighting Kitao was the man with the exciting profile of “strongman contest winner, just got out of prison” – Nathan Jones. But the actual fight didn’t excite anyone, ending with a bout with indigestion.

With that one fight in MMA as his last, Kitao retired, and his retirement ceremony was held the next year at PRIDE 4. Kitao’s personal feelings had more to do with it than the staff’s desire, only performed to satisfy his wish. During the ceremony, the Bukou Dojo’s Masaaki Mochizuki²² (presently in DRAGON GATE²³) was given a sword called Demon of Bukou, but the meaning of this performance evaded the audience who blanketed the dome once again in boos.

Kitao, who won over (in every sense of the term²⁴) Bam Bam Bigelow in his debut pro-wrestling match, had bad affinity with the dome until the end.

With the way the bouts unfolded, besides the main event, PRIDE 1 left a largely meandering impression, but if it had gone the way it was originally planned, including Sakuraba vs. Renzo, the flow of the events would have definitely been different. If Sakuraba had lost to Renzo, Takada’s loss in the main bout wouldn’t have had such a huge impact²⁵.

²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masaaki_Mochizuki

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon_Gate

²⁴ aite - companion, partner, company, other party, addressee, opponent (sumo).

²⁵ As all of Japan had expected Takada to win.

Three years later, in Colosseum 2000 as well, in the main fight of the evening, Masakatsu Funaki lost to Rickson, but in an undercard bout, Funaki's top student Yuki Kondo KO'd Rickson's top student Saulo Ribeiro, once again creating a shock, and a feeling that Kondo would succeed Funaki spread among the fans. It would likely have been the same in PRIDE 1 had Sakuraba been victorious over Renzo²⁶.

In the end, after not being able to compete in PRIDE 1, Sakuraba appeared two months later at Yokohama Arena in UFC Japan. Beating Marcus "Conan" Silveira and winning the Ultimate Japan Tournament, he left his mark on history with his proclamation, "Pro-wrestlers are tough!"

From March of the following year with PRIDE 2, he became a necessary fixture, and two years later he crushed Royler. After that, he went on to consecutively face Royce, Renzo and Ryan, being given the name "Gracie Hunter." For this as well, had his fight with Renzo taken place back in PRIDE 1, the Sakuraba era might have started two years earlier.

Had that happened, the history of Japanese MMA would be completely different. Of course, back in PRIDE 1 when Sakuraba had little experience in Vale Tudo, he also very well could have lost to Renzo, so it is hard to say which way would have been better, but that it represents a fork in the road of MMA history is beyond question.

²⁶ That Sakuraba would succeed Takada.

File 004

A plan for Riki Choshu, Shinya Hashimoto and Akira Maeda to fight in "PRIDE 1"

It doesn't need to be repeated that the main draw of PRIDE 1, the start of PRIDE in '97, was Nobuhiko Takada vs. Rickson Gracie. So to say, it was the ultimate pro-wrestling vs. MMA battle. As has been said, the whole reason for the existence of PRIDE and for PRIDE 1 being put on was to make this one fight happen.

People held absolute interest in the fact that "pro-wrestler" Takada was challenging himself to go into Vale Tudo, but at various stages of the planning, a number of other Japanese pro-wrestlers' names were also raised. Among them were a few "are you serious?" warriors.

KRS (Kakutougi Revolution Spirits) who originally came up with the idea for PRIDE was a company incorporating a number of different industry people under one umbrella. During the day, each did his work, and at night, in their city office, "not this, but maybe that" planning talks went on and on, night after night. Naturally, matchmaking was also part of the conversations, and everyone was having fun thinking up their dream cards like, "If this guy fought that guy, it'd be great."

Thinking about the reality of it, there are a huge number of fights that would be difficult to pull from their ball and chain and actually put on. That said, the staff feel that that was their most fun time, excitedly thinking up dream

fights and discussing them among their pals.

At the same time, as the concept of the PRIDE event, they expressed their ideal of, “a ring not touched by a single color, pure white.” A place in which athletes from any organization could enter without obstacles. To make that a reality, Sakakibara and others went around to various organizations with their plan papers to discuss.

To make the request, “We are going to put on this kind of event, so please, won’t you participate in it?” For that, they had taken to writing down the names of various top athletes from various organizations on the plan papers.

Akira Maeda, Masakatsu Funaki, Kiyoshi Tamura, Minoru Suzuki, the so-called “U-kei²⁷” fighters as well of course occupied a place in their plans. For fighters like the Gracies that were judged to be the strongest in the world of MMA, pro-wrestlers would be standing in their way.

²⁷ Of the U-Inter type.

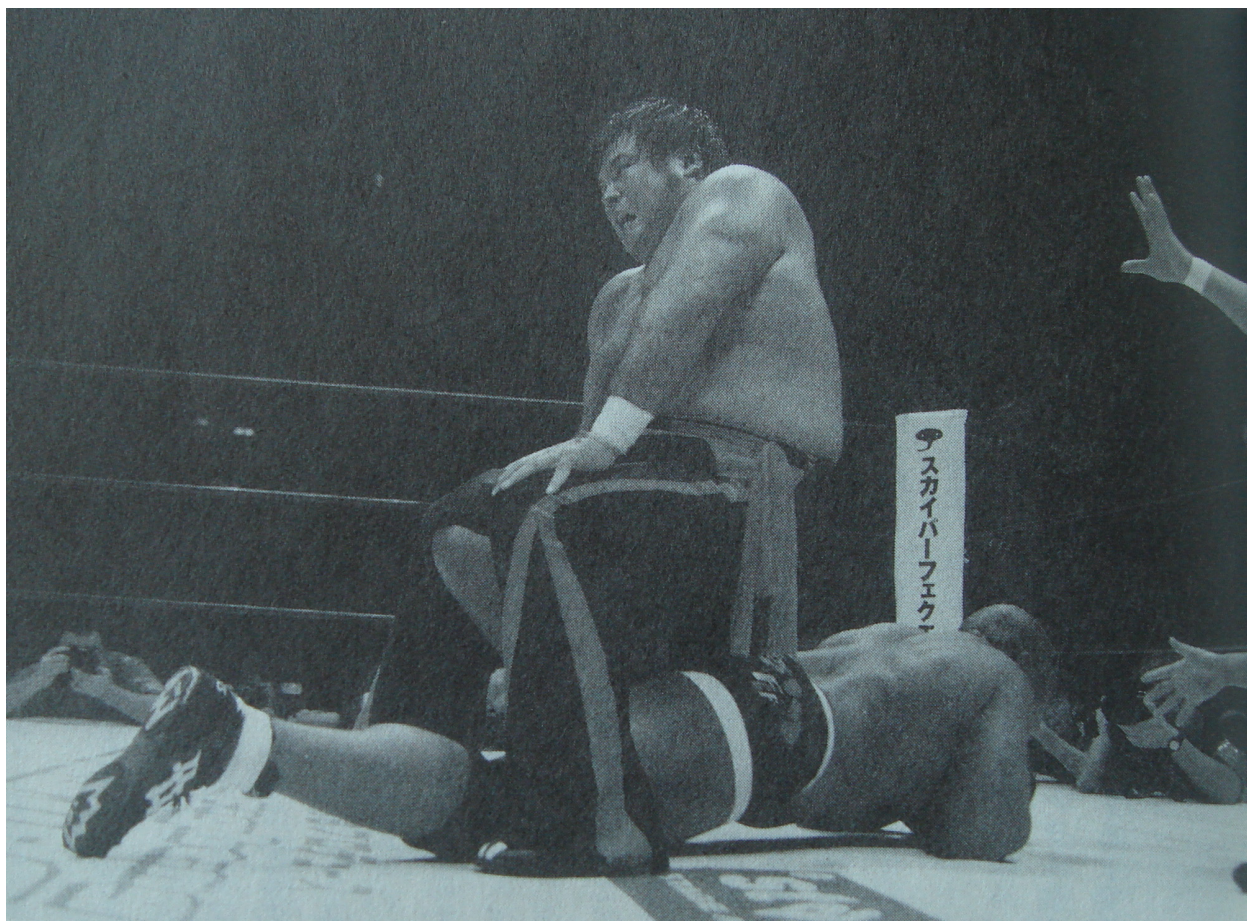


PHOTO – January 4, 1999, until his match with Naoya Ogawa, the symbol of New Japan Pro-Wrestling's²⁸ power, "Hakaiou"²⁹ Shinya Hashimoto³⁰. In the end, he didn't compete in MMA, but at the first Inoki Bom-ba-ye, New Year's Eve 2000, he put on an amazing display of hard pro-wrestling against Gary Goodridge.

²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Japan_Pro_Wrestling

²⁹ Emperor of destruction.

³⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinya_Hashimoto

Shinya Hashimoto, Riki Choshu³¹, Mitsuhara Misawa³²..... it was also in the plans to have these huge Japanese pro-wrestlers battle against the tough guys fighting in the UFC at that time. Just looking at the names listed in the plan papers, they must have thought this was going to be an amazing dream event.

The KRS members at that time included some people associated with Takada, pro-wrestling, and MMA, but mostly they weren't "residents of industry village." It is because of this that they could draw up such a bold plan. The breathing pace of industry, the outright acceptance of disappointment, the secret connections in the background between groups, if any of this had come into their heads, they wouldn't have gone into the scary-looking places that they continued to poke their heads deeper into. It was exactly "You don't know the strength of a person you don't know³³."

Of course, they were generally handled by being turned away at the front door. Even if they were allowed to talk about their plan, it was invariably, "I'm just listening." At any rate, the people bringing these plan papers around were people with virtually no connections to the pro-wrestling and MMA industries. Thinking about it from the side of the companies they were visiting, it's a case of, "And who the hell are you?"

As well, there was a fatal point. It was that "Takada vs. Rickson" was set in stone as the main event. That is, no matter where they went with whatever

³¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riki_Chōshū

³² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitsuharu_Misawa

³³ Japanese proverb.

papers and card, the fighters they would be trying to gather would all be undercard and below. To put it bluntly, it was like they were going around requesting, "We are putting on an event with Takada as the main point, won't you come and fight below that to support him?"

This talk reminds us of the "Pro-wrestling World Tournament" slapped together in 1994 by U-Inter, given the subtitle, "The Hundred-million Yen Tournament." Written invitations were sent to U-Inter's Mitsuharu Misawa, Genichiro Tenryu³⁴, Hashimoto, Maeda and Funaki. It was announced that if they won, they'd receive one-hundred million yen (\$1M USD) in prize money.

Of course, not a single one of them accepted the invitation, but looking at it from the point of U-Inter, it seems that it was a provocative move made to get people talking about it. So, the refusal should be discounted to some extent.

Then, as for Funaki and Hashimoto, they were also invited by then director Kazuyoshi Ishii³⁵ for the opening round of the '93 K-1 GP. The timing could be felt, it was the vacuum right before Funaki started Pancrase and before Hashimoto plunged into hard-style pro-wrestling, there was a nuance of "we are offering a place for you to work."

At the time, no one knew how much of it was just lip service or whether it was just to get people talking; their announcement coming from inside the industry, where they breathe the industry's air, was fundamentally different from the actions KRS was making.

³⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genichiro_Tenryu

³⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazuyoshi_Ishii

If you are going to put on an all-star match even in pro-wrestling you need more than a bit of nerves. Who will participate, the match order, handling overall matters..... these are things that wear on a person's nerves, even someone that is used to this world of negotiation. So suddenly some people from completely outside your field appear, and moreover, they then say "... in MMA," so of course it didn't go well from the start.

But, proceeding with their "You don't know the strength of a person you don't know," the staff went forward, dealing with it with an attitude of, "Well, let's just give it a try." This continued even after PRIDE got on track in earnest later on, becoming their fundamental motivating force of, "Well there's no way this matchup would have been made before³⁶, but let's just try to see if we can put it on."

And because of that, PRIDE was able to put together dynamic cards one after the other that left people simply saying, "Wow." Maybe the most important thing was that right from the start they were based on the flexible concept where, "This can't be done" didn't exist.

But then, as "The" Akira Maeda was also on the planning papers that Sakakibara et al were bringing around, maybe it's really that they had no fear of any mortal man. "The main event is gonna be Takada, and we'd like you to be a minor performer." Just picturing those negotiations, I break out in a cold sweat. For someone that knows even a little of the details of the industry, of Maeda and RINGS' history with Takada, you could count me out of that one.

³⁶ An implication that it was taboo or forbidden.

File 005

Did it rescue PRIDE? Royce vs. Kerr canceled and Kerr vs. Cikatic put on in its place

As PRIDE hoisted its flag with PRIDE 1, along with Takada's shocking loss, unable to mount any offense at all, to Rickson, it scored reasonable results. But the problem for the organizers was "what's next." They were originally thinking that PRIDE might just be a one-off, but now they decided there would be a PRIDE 2.

However, a card at the level of impact of Takada vs. Rickson isn't so easily put together. But for PRIDE 2, in which Rickson wouldn't be competing, they had to do suitable matchmaking to put something at the level of PRIDE 1 into reality. To do that, they started negotiations, with KRS preparing to use Royce Gracie.

His opponent would be "The Specimen" as he was called at the time, UFC fighter Mark Kerr. At 80 kilograms [176 lbs], matching Royce against the heavyweight Kerr would be a mismatch, but it was still the era in which the Gracies were considered the strongest, even without weight classes. It was a big match made with the thought, "With Kerr, the Gracies are going to suffer their first defeat, aren't they?" However, from there started a bunch of noisy drama. To start off talks about "Rickson's successor," raising the name of Royce Gracie, his real younger brother and the man who showed the world Gracie jiu-jitsu in the UFC, was a matter of course. To get Royce on board, they

flew immediately to see him right after PRIDE 1.

Getting through the negotiation starting gates would require talking with the tough businessman Rorion Gracie, Royce's older brother. Persistently flying out to Los Angeles time and time again, finally the negotiations took place and they escaped back to Japan with Royce's participation cinched!

This time, it is said that Rorion and Royce's side had virtually no objections to fighting in the new rising promotion of PRIDE. Or maybe, as Rickson had fought in the first event, they had simple been waiting to be contacted. The bottleneck ended up being the bout rules, guarantee, the number of cornermen and all kinds of money issues, problems with a lot of nooks and crannies.



PHOTO – Branko Cikatić came along with Dojo Chakuriki's owner Tom Harinck to Japan for PRIDE 2. Along with this, Cikatić is known for having worked as pinch-hitter if Alexander Karelin couldn't appear for Akira Maeda's retirement bout in February 1999.

It was still the era where the rules for MMA had not yet been codified worldwide. In PRIDE 1, the rules differed between each match that took place. Further, the Gracies were very particular about fighting under the set of rules which they were used to fighting under. PRIDE representatives had no choice but to swallow Rorion's "no time limit, no referee stoppage" specifications. After clearing a number of other conditions thrown at them, agreement was reached.

The opponent was another problem. KRS had been thinking Mark Kerr from the start. A massively-built wrestler, he made his MMA debut in Brazil in 1997, became an MMA specialist, and entered the UFC where he soon became a star fighter.

At the same time, there were talks that he would appear in Shooto as well, but PRIDE was the organization successful in scooping him up. Comparing a fight between the much talked about UFC fighter and Royce who built the UFC with the Takada vs. Rickson match, it had hardcore appeal, but also seemed a good drawcard for the event overall. Left was to see whether they could get Royce to agree to fight against Kerr. The plan was to feel out Royce's side and then act, but the matchup was unexpectedly readily accepted.

Looking at it from Royce's point of view, he probably had so much confidence he was thinking, "He's an easy opponent." With that, the main event was decided and the two athletes made their way to Japan and headed to photo shoots. Running with the catch copy, "Royce is next," the event was announced in January.

But, soon after something major happened. A fax came from Royce's side, stating, "Royce has twisted a bone in his back and has become unable to

fight in his match.” That it was a fax rather than email gives you a feel for the time, but for the Japanese staff it certainly was a bombshell. In hot haste, confirmation was made, Royce wouldn’t be able to fight, and the January schedule had to be scrapped.

Royce humbly accepted the request of, “We would like you to come to Japan to attend an apology press conference,” coming with Royler to attend, but the damage to PRIDE’s image could not be escaped from. To take back this lost point, they had to decide what they could do to replace Royce.

If the fight was going to be “Royce vs. Kerr,” the star would without a doubt be Royce, but if it were to become “Kerr vs. xx,” then they would have no choice but to push Kerr. Further, the event had been postponed but they still didn’t have that much time.

The people in charge suffered until finally coming to a conclusion – it would be Branko Cikatić, who had also fought at the first event and who was a former K-1 GP champion. He was somewhat known, and as well, with his fight in PRIDE 1 declared a no contest, his true ability had not yet been seen. Under MMA rules, Kerr was clearly favored to win, as the balance between their levels was very poor. But anyway, with no time left, the only line left for them to use was “UFC Champion vs. K-1 Champion.”

The person put in charge of getting Cikatić’s OK immediately headed to Holland, but this too was not a case of getting an easy answer. Day after day, they headed to his gym, drinking coffee given to them by the owner of the gym, and had talks, pushing gradually and finally getting them to accept the offer. The main card, a most difficult birth, finally came to be concluded.

The actual main bout, after heading through all of the confusion, didn’t

end up working out very well. Just two minutes in, Cikatić lost by disqualification.

While Cikatić had fought in PRIDE 1, that bout was under five 3-minute round, standing bout rules. This Kerr bout was in actuality his first MMA fight. Kerr, with his wrestling background, naturally came looking to shoot and take the match to the ground, and Cikatić, looking to avoid the ground, grabbed the ropes no less than three times to avoid Kerr's takedowns.

Warnings to him added up, and in the end, he was disqualified. The main bout, which had been worked so hard on to make real - it was too disappointing, once again resulting in indigestion and booing.

But in a way, it was important to have put on another main event. The event had been announced, it was being broadcast live on PPV, and in any case, the main event went on without any cancellation. This too was part of PRIDE's experiencing of birthing pains. And we were made to wait two years for Royce's eventual first challenge in PRIDE to come at the PRIDE GP 2000.

Even with Royce and Kerr appearing in the same event, maybe showing signs of the times, a match between them was never talked about again. If it had actually happened at the time, we have to wonder what kind of fight it would have been. If Kerr had been victorious over Royce, the Sakuraba vs. Royce match wouldn't have been so deeply moving.

The cancellation of Royce vs. Kerr changed the future of PRIDE, the future of MMA.

File 006

All the way to the planning stages, a fight with ex-sumo wrestler of second highest rank Konishiki - PRIDE had surprising love for sumo

A major reason why PRIDE was able to gain the overwhelming support of its fans was that it had a strong element of "perfect meritocracy." Because of this, PRIDE fans gained a feeling of superiority compared to those of other events that were the talk of the day.

Speaking of the public talking, the former Yokozuna Akebono received a lot of attention from the general public when he appeared in the 2003 New Year's Day "Dynamite!!"

Bob Sapp and Akebono who at the time were at the peak of (their) fame, were to fight in K-1 rules, and this super megaton level "card" became huge news across Japan, attracting a lot of attention, and the broadcast on the same day achieved a miraculous audience share.

On the one hand, it would be reasonable if the frenzied PRIDE fans had felt "We don't care if he's a former Yokozuna, there's no room for him here." But actually, PRIDE has received a lot of attention in the world

of Sumo, and there were even plans once for Konishiki³⁷ to fight for them.

The talk about Konishiki escalated until 1998. October 11 of the same year, PRIDE 4 was held with the rematch between Nobuhiko Takada and Rickson Gracie as the main event.

This year, PRIDE 2 to 4 - three tournaments - were held, but as KRS, which managed the early PRIDE fights, had made the Takada-Gracie match the highest priority, and because of the huge expenses, they were in a tough financial position, so the objective of the next tournament was not yet decided. The new organization with DSE started, and in April of 1999, "PRIDE 5" held in Nagoya, marked a resumption of activity. So, this was the largest period of time between events of half a year, but they managed to avoid a prolonged crisis.

From this time, the author Momose Hiromichi (deceased) who came to be called "the mystery man of PRIDE" just around this time, and Mr. Momose Hiromichi's wide range of connections also came to be used in the running of PRIDE. One thing that surfaced as a part of this was the amazing idea to "Welcome Akimoto Yasushi³⁸ as PRIDE producer."

³⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konishiki_Yasokichi

³⁸ A Japanese pop music producer.



PHOTO - With the KAMIPRO interview as the incentive, amazingly, the former highest-ranking sumo division³⁹ fighter and current pro-wrestler Tachihikari actually fought in PRIDE GP 2000. In the end, he lost to Goodrich in just a few seconds but, until this time, there was a lot of fuss about the real strength of Sumo wrestlers if they were to enter the ring.

³⁹ Makuuchi - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makuuchi>

Akimoto is a competent producer who gave the world such huge mainstream things as Onyanko Club⁴⁰ but as for his involvement in the world of pro wrestling or martial arts, on the occasion of starting "Japan female pro wrestling," he did such things as naming "Cutie Suzuki," the first female pro-wrestler, and so he at least had some relevant experience.

If PRIDE being produced by Akimoto had become reality, what would it have become – it is both scary and intriguing.

Akimoto went into producing with Konishiki's move from the world of sumo to TV celebrity in '98. When Akimoto's name started floating around, Sakakibara was saying, "Wouldn't it be amazing if Konishiki appeared in PRIDE?" The way he was saying it, people assumed, "It's probably already been decided."

Completely unopen to compromise, Sakakibara who was continuously protecting PRIDE's identity (to put it nicely), had a strange amount of pliancy.

As expected, though, this plan disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Of course it would become a talking point, but if they really did it and put on matches..... to even think about it a little bit, it is better for everyone that it didn't happen.

In 2000, the first-ever two PRIDE GP events happened. In the opening round, ex-sumo and pro-wrestler Tachihikari started the bouts off. In an interview for "Kami no Puroresu RADICAL (now Kamipro)," he made a

⁴⁰ An all-girl pop music idol group from the 1980s http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Onyanko_Club

Probably their biggest hit was "Please don't take off my sailor suit," taking the flirting position of a Japanese schoolgirl saying she's too young to be stripped naked.

number of comments that would not go over well in the world of sumo, including that he mentioned the interest he had been receiving from PRIDE, and not very long after that, he signed with them. At the time, PRIDE still had this kind of money.

However, in his first match, against Gary Goodridge, he lost weakly without making a single bit of offense, perishing in under one minute. In one instant, the sumo dream was over.

But PRIDE's "Sumo Quest" didn't end there. The next plan floating around was going after a former Yokozuna⁴¹, the big brother, Wakanohana. While K-1 had cinched Akebono for the '03 Dynamite!! show, in the background, DSE had been hoping to use Wakanohana⁴² as their surprise fighter for the Otoko-matsuri.

At the end of 2000, he left sumo and became a TV celebrity, and made a started working with the aim of going into American football, with plausible rumors of his entry into MMA floating around. But this too became a phantom.

At exactly the same time, PRIDE started looking into another route for acquiring sumo wrestlers. This time, it would be American Rikishi⁴³ Sentoryu⁴⁴ who announced his retirement from sumo in November 2003.

⁴¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makuuchi#Yokozuna>

⁴² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wakanohana_Masaru

⁴³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_sumo_terms

⁴⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Armstrong_Miller

Seeing the news that Akebono was going into MMA, Chiyotaikai⁴⁵ called his associated Sakakibara to recommend Sentoryu. Immediately, Sakakibara called Sentoryu up.

It is obvious from this that PRIDE wanted no matter how to find a “rival horse” to K-1’s Akebono. For Sentoryu, who had been considered “made for MMA” from the start, they tried quickly to get him to make his debut in the New Year’s Eve show, but due to his danpatsushiki⁴⁶, he had to turn it down. He ended up debuting in the heavyweight GP in ‘04.

Aiming to be the first sumo wrestler to adapt to MMA, Sentoryu, who was strongly built, had a muscular body, and who also had been training striking was probably the #1 choice among Rikishi, and he succeeded in his first bout. Taking the mic after his victory, he announced, “Sumo is powerful!” making sumo fans as well feel happy.

As well, Tamakairiki made his debut, and a fighter named Juukei, brought up by Terao, fought one bout in “MMA THE BEST,” but overall, the sumo wrestlers’ fight record in MMA was not good. There was that, and also the fact that PRIDE and sumo seemed to have polar opposite images, but DSE’s side maybe wasn’t willing to recognize that. One could think that in every important point in PRIDE’s history, a sumo element had made an appearance. But really, the connection between PRIDE and sumo had been close since the start. In PRIDE 1, past Yokozuna Kitao had fought, and in PRIDE 3, super giant Rikishi Emmanuel Yarborough, the talk of World Sumo (amateur), had stepped

⁴⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiyotaikai_Ryūji

⁴⁶ Retirement ceremony of a sumo wrestler where his top-knot is cut.

up into the ring. From this you can see, in the end, that PRIDE had surprising love for sumo.

For PRIDE, with its sidelight as, “a place for those strongest men of fantasy to have their abilities tested,” professional sumo, with its “ultimately strong fantasy,” was surely, along with pro-wrestlers, an important existence.

PRIDE Fighters' Unknown Stories 2

Minowaman x Hayato "Mach" Sakurai

"In the middle of an audience of tens of thousands, just myself and my opponent standing alone, that ecstatic feeling could only be felt in PRIDE" (Mach)

"Suddenly having lost three fights in a row in PRIDE, I thought to myself, "What should I do?" but I am the way I am now because of that." (Minowaman)



PHOTO – Minowaman. Born January 12, 1976 in Gifu prefecture. Real name: Ikuhisa Minowa. Made his pro debut in Pancrase in 1997. He gave it his all and won over fans. Fought his first match in PRIDE New Year's Eve 2003. He participated in the welterweight GP and fought in open weight matches against Giant Silva and Butterbean. From New Year's Eve 2006, he took the ring name "Minowaman." 175 cm, 83 kg.

Hayato Mach Sakurai. Born August 24, 1975 in Ibaraki prefecture. Made his pro debut in 1996. Boasts a 5-year undefeated run in the Shooto ring, and became Shooto 4th middleweight champion in 1997. Started participating in PRIDE from the 2003 New Year's Eve PRIDE Otoko-matsuri. Semi-finalist in the 2005 PRIDE lightweight GP. He has presently moved to the welterweight class, climbing to the top in DREAM. 171 cm, 77 kg.

Interviewer: This is a bit out of the blue, but age-wise you two are like classmates, right?

Mach: Huh? (Looking toward Minowaman) You were born in Showa year 50⁴⁷?

Minowaman: 51. But I was too young to go to school so I went the same year as you.

Mach: Oh, really. I had no idea! I thought you were younger than me.
Hahhahahaha!

Minowaman: So, you're from the Kinnikuman⁴⁸ era like me.

Mach: Oh I see! Yeah!

Interviewer: You're both the same age, and you both started in PRIDE with the exact same timing. 2003, PRIDE Otoko-matsuri.

Mach: Hmm, yeah!

Interviewer: So, for two people similar in these ways, I wonder if we could talk about what you think about what PRIDE was. To begin with, what were your images of PRIDE?

⁴⁷ 1975.

⁴⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinnikuman>

Mach: I'd have to say, ya know, that. The first time, the start, the feeling in the first event when Rickson (Gracie) fought Takada (Nobuhiko). The event that started from that.

Minowaman: For me, I went to see PRIDE 1 live. It was actually the first event around when I made my pro debut. I went pro in Pancrase in July '97, then PRIDE came on the 11th of October at the Tokyo Dome. There, there was a locker room filled with fighters, I remember being shown backstage.

Interviewer: To see such an event up close like that, did you have any feeling of wanting to fight in PRIDE, any sense of...

Minowaman: Nah, I had just made my pro debut, one fight, one fight at a time, I couldn't think about anything other than my next fight, that's where my head was at.

Mach: That was '97 right? Then I was in Shooto, middle or welter, I forget which, but I was fighting around that class, so I thought like, "PRIDE is an event for heavyweight fighters to battle it out."

Interviewer: But, in reality, you both ended up in PRIDE six years after PRIDE 1, entering the PRIDE Otoko-matsuri event, right.

Mach: Minowa, who was your opponent?

Minowaman: Quinton "Rampage" Jackson.

Interviewer: Mach, you fought Daiju Takase, right?

Mach: Ah, yeah. Well, basically it's just the same as now. But at that time, there were a lot of vague, weird things in PRIDE. For example, weigh-ins were held two days before the event.

Minowaman: Ah, yeah, I think I remember two days.

Mach: Now, weigh-ins are the day before the fight, right. Well, if it's two days before, there's no problem with two days before. For our health, too!

Interviewer: Yeah, really, that sounds much better overall for your body (laughing).

Mach: But now it's kind of hard to even imagine.

Interviewer: There was a time like that? (laughing) Later, the strict weight classes came and PRIDE Bushido with its focus on the welterweight class.

Mach: Ya, that time, hmm. It's been some years, right? Bushido came..... I was 83 kg (183 lbs) around that time, so..... what were we talking about?

Interviewer: About what your impressions were around the time when PRIDE Bushido came about (laughing). They say PRIDE Bushido was built for you.

Mach: Ah, Bushido! At that time, to say it outright, what the promoters say changes all the time, you can't get a hold of it, honestly, I don't really know! (plainly)

Interviewer: You didn't really understand (laughing)? You must've felt some differences between the events as you were coming from Shooto.

Mach: When I first started in MMA, if you said MMA, there was no response but Shooto. From there, different organizations started to pop up, and PRIDE was one of them. Thinking that, I also started to feel, "Shooto is [just] one of the MMA organizations, too."

Interviewer: There's more than just Shooto.

Mach: Other organizations went from heavyweight to having mixes of weight classes, I started thinking I could make my way in this class. I was probably thinking that.

Interviewer: I've heard from athletes that from the birth of the Shooto ring, the facet of making a living for welterweight class Japanese fighters changed, what do you think?

Mach: Well, whether you can eat or not, I'm not sure what you're asking. But, the life of an MMA fighter is a short one, right. A short life span, how many

fighters there are throughout the world now, I don't know, but I think it's a comparatively unprofitable business!

Interviewer: Do you agree, Minowa?

Minowaman: Yeah, I get that feeling.

Interviewer: You guys are trying to answer alike (laughing)?

Mach: But really, everyone doing their best and trying to make the MMA world better and get the fans and everyone excited I think is really awesome! Well, if MMA fighters can keep going and make it to retirement age like pro-wrestlers, it'd be good. As for me, that's what I'm aiming for, but unfortunately up until now no one has shown the way, right?

Interviewer: You're aiming for an active life (laughing)?

Mach: Maybe I'll apprentice under Atsushi Oonita⁴⁹!

Minowaman: W-why Atsushi Oonita?

Mach: Well, it was a joke! (laughing)

Minowaman: But as an occupation, it's kinda low-class.

Mach: Yeah, yeah, yeah isn't it!

⁴⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atsushi_Oonita

Minowaman: If you look at it as a job, it's like selling seedy stuff. I mean, you hit someone and you get money for it, normally thinking about it, that's strange, right.

Mach: And you saying "strange," we also have to go out in front of a bunch of people in basically panties.

Minowaman: Hahahahah. Well, that's the place for it so we can somehow let it slide.

Interviewer: Especially Minowa, you wear those short tights. In Brazil, you'd probably be mistaken as a gay.



PHOTO – Minowaman and Mach both made their PRIDE debuts at the 2003 PRIDE Otoko-matsuri. It was PRIDE's first New Year's Eve solo flight. This day, head honcho Takada, this time without his loincloth, descended from the roof of Saitama Super Arena in a vision to call out, "You are all men!"

Minowaman: Y-yea (looking awkward). They say, “aren’t you going to put something on over that?”

Mach: Yeah, really (laughing). I just remembered! One great thing about PRIDE, for example, the locker rooms. Up until then, it had been like prison cells, but PRIDE’s were really nice.

Minowaman: They put food in there for us, fruits. That was nice.

Interviewer: I often hear from fighters about the richness of the catering service.

Mach: Yeah, that was #1 even in the world! The UFC and other organizations were holding a lot of events, and I think that’s great, but then there’s production, too. The fireworks BOOM exploding, if you went somewhere else, that wouldn’t be there. They’d say, “We can’t do that.”

Interviewer: Because there were different regulations depending on the organization.

Mach: It seems the US is like that, too. To break through that, PRIDE Las Vegas was held at the Thomas & Mack Center.

Minowaman: Oh, really?

Mach: The MGM Grand, Mandalay Bay, the places putting on boxing and UFC events are arenas inside casino hotels, so gunpowder is forbidden. But they

wanted to put on PRIDE in the states with the production that they were doing in Japan, so they expressly went about trying to find a place where they could use fireworks. PRIDE really brought that to a new level.

Interviewer: For fighters, too, having high-level production in PRIDE was a good thing?

Mach: Yeah. You see that and you get like, "Let's do it!" But, uhm, the opening and all that, the fireworks exploding, at first it was scary.

Minowaman: You're unprepared for it and you get shocked, right.

Interviewer: Talking about production, the pre-fight videos to introduce the fighters and pump up the fans were a big part of that. For fighters, how were PRIDE's videos?

Mach: Nah, honestly, it's not a pump-up thing for the fighters. For the audience, of course, it's great, but we don't have the kind of time to sit and watch right before we fight.

Minowaman: I'm also not able to do that before a match, but seeing them later is good. You see it and think, "Ah, that's what it was."

Interviewer: We see Minowa chasing an airplane, a lot of videos with very strange intensive training, what do you think of those videos as a spectator?

Minowaman: Like, "Ah, that's why they were laughing."

Interviewer: You mean up until you saw it later you didn't know why you could hear laughs all around you?

Minowaman: Yeah. I can't see the video at the event, I can only hear the laughs. But it is right before the fight and I'm very serious, so I think, "What the hell would be making them laugh?"

Mach: Also, if you say PRIDE, the passage through the audience to the stage was ridiculously long. Well, I think it was even longer back in the day.

Interviewer: For certain, at Otoko-matsuri and the other big events, all of the fighters would line up in a row on that walkway.

Mach: Yeah, I saw that, and I'm like, "Goddamn, that's long!"

Minowaman: Definitely. In the New Year's Eve '03 event, while I was making my entrance to the ring, it felt really long. But for me, a longer ramp is better.

Mach: Because you run! But these days it doesn't seem long, right? It's not long at all now..... Ahh, because the capacity got smaller! Ah hah!

Interviewer: You noticed (laughing). Because Otoko-matsuri was with Saitama Super Arena in its stadium version, but in DREAM, they set it up in its arena configuration. So, for both of you, you fought over 10 years including PRIDE, is there something in particular that left a real mark on you all these years later?

Minowaman: For me, it has to be my first three fights. As I stepped up into PRIDE, I quickly lost three in a row. So, those three consecutive losses are like a turning point or something like that.

Mach: For me, it's gotta be the tournament!

Interviewer: Ah, you fought Jens Pulver, Joachim Hansen, and then Takanori Gomi in the finals of the LWGP.

Mach: Those three. And who else did I fight... I've forgotten! Ah, let me see that (he says, then looks at his entire fight record). Ah yeah, Los Vegas left an impression.

Interviewer: Isn't that because you lost a lot at the casinos?

Mach: Ah yeah. The early days, against Rodrigo (Gracie), Crosley (Gracie), I don't remember.

Interviewer: You were fighting in the -83kg division then and dropped all the way down to -73kg for the LWGP, so I get the feeling you were suffering from the drop during that era.

Mach: Well, there were a lot of things. Everyone just sees the fight. But really, there were 2-3 full years where it was really hard.



PHOTO – First PRIDE participation, to fight in the heavy -83kg weight class, as it would be expected, Mach wasn't so effective, but since the September 2005 LWGP where he dropped down to the -73kg class, he was able to show what he had to offer. He crushed veterans Jens Pulver and Joachim Hansen one after the other.

Interviewer: Talking about weight, Minowaman tends to fight in matches that transcend weight classes, Mach, what do you think when you see that?

Mach: Damn, it's really amazing. I mean, how tall are you?

Minowaman: A hundred... seventy....X, please write it down like that (laughing).

Interviewer: Well, in your official profile, it lists you as 175 (laughing).

Mach: So I think that's really amazing.

Minowaman: But for me, I'd be no good having a decided weight class and having to cut weight, so I think the fighters doing that are amazing.

Mach: But dropping in weight increases your vitality more and more. You really feel overflowing.

Minowaman: O..o-overflowing?

Mach: Yeah, when you're feeling good. If you fuck up, it's bad, but if things are going well, it's better to cut down. You can move well, you have stamina, you have power, so it's kinda the reverse.

Interviewer: So you mean, like when Minowaman fought Giant Silva, you have a feeling like it's unthinkable?

Mach: Hm, well, Sudo (Genki)⁵⁰ also did that kind of fight, Butterbean and so on. In a reverse way again, I guess if the opponent's that damn big, it's cool. But how was it? Silva...

Minowaman: Well of course he was really big, so I thought I couldn't let any chance slip by. If you let a chance slip by once, there's a good possibility that it'll turn the match upside-down.

Mach: Ah, I understand.

Minowaman: If the tide turns for the worse and you want to get it going back in your direction, it takes so many times more energy than if you were fighting in the same weight class. You lose power just running and waiting for the next attack. Well, I guess that's the same in any weight class.

Mach: I thought the Gilbert Yvel fight was even more amazing than the Giant Silva fight. You took it quickly and decisively with a leg technique. It makes sense, going for the legs.

Minowaman: Ah that, in that first counter, the knee was threatened, but if my entry hadn't been deep enough, I would've been screwed.

Interviewer: But, to fight against such a rich variety of opponents was, I think, part of what made PRIDE what it was.

⁵⁰ He refers to Sudo with the Japanese -chan suffix, a sign of friendly affection.

Minowaman: Yeah. I was also fighting against like Butterbean, Crocop, those guys.

Interviewer: Mach, you were fighting in a pretty big range from 73 to 83 kg too, fighting in the lightweight class seems especially tough.

Mach: Fighting in a range with a 10 kg difference, if it were boxing, it's not that much different than (Oscar) De la Hoya's domination in six different weight classes (laughing).

Interviewer: Ahh, in boxing, a 10 kilo span covers 5 or 6 classes, doesn't it (laughing).

Mach: Talking about that, we have to then look at Minowaman who doesn't even fight with weight classes (laughing). But, maybe next time, he should fight against someone smaller than him, don't you think. It's been nothing but giants for him up til now.

Minowaman: I say I don't care how much my opponent weighs, but really when you look at it, I've only been given damn giants. Those are mostly put together because doing it that way seems more interesting.

Mach: if Dynamite!! was to put like Yamamoto "Kid" (Norifumi) vs. Minowaman on TV, I'd be so into that!

Interviewer: A match against the wild child, that'd be a fight everyone would be anxiously looking forward to.

Mach: Yeah! It'd be good, right?

Minowaman: (silently smiling)

Interviewer: To go back to what we were talking about before, what was the #1 best thing for each of you in your time in PRIDE?

Minowaman: That I could fight against so many different fighters. When I was in Pancrase, I only had the information that was inside the organization, but leaving them and becoming a free agent, then I could get info on all the guys that were fighting in PRIDE, the staff, I could talk with a lot of different people, and that was good. And of course, the fight money was good.

Mach: Well, that's also important, as a pro. What I think was the best thing in PRIDE was, after all, to be in the middle of some tens of thousands of fans, standing alone and fighting against your foe, that feeling of ecstasy. I'm getting that sensation now, too, but the sense of being in that PRIDE ring, if you weren't in there I guess you can't understand. And....., if MMA hadn't been around, I would've been doing nothing but just going on living! (blank face)

Minowaman: What, what's that (bitter smile)!?

Interviewer: What did you think hearing things like “PRIDE seems like it’s going to end?”



PHOTO – If you say PRIDE’s Minowa, it’s the fights that transcend weight classes. From PRIDE’s orthodox school, Mirko, Silva, Yvel, etc. to Butterbean, Giant Silva, Mark Hunt, etc., battling forcefully again and again against monsters with too much of a weight advantage.

Mach: But, well, saying it was ending, we're fighting in DREAM now, right. So, I think positively, "Only the name's gonna change."

Interviewer: Thinking, "It'll somehow work out" ?

Mach: If I myself do good, well, PRIDE's name might be gone, but PRIDE isn't.

Minowaman: For me, it's the same. I was worried, but, well, the fighters are there, the fans are there, if you have that, you can start again.

Interviewer: In July '07 there was some confusing info about "going to the UFC." In an interview around that time, I really felt an impact from your statement, "I want to fight in the UFC, but if PRIDE were around, fighting there would be best."

Mach: Yeah, you know, that production, the sense of unity among the fans, I could feel it in my body, I wouldn't ever want to stop. UFC has those things to a degree, more or less, but after all, PRIDE is different. So, no matter what organization I fight under, there will probably always be that feeling that something's missing.

Interviewer: People say the energy at UFC events is terrific.

Mach: Well yeah, but Japanese fans would be watching PRIDE right. But watching on PPV or whatever, if you are just looking in the ring or the octagon or whatever, they're not so different, but if you look at the whole thing, the

event space and all that, they're completely different. The UFC fans, all they do is yell!

Interviewer: UFC fans only yell (laughing).

Mach: Well, even saying PRIDE is gone, the fighters, the staff, the fans are all the same, so we can make that outlook on the world, Mach World, Minowaman World, and we have to make things explode! And, Minowaman vs. "Kid" Yamamoto, right! It's needed!

Minowaman: (silently smiling)

Chapter Three

“Era of Exchange and the Path of
Cooperating with K-1”

At the end of PRIDE 4 where Takada-Rickson 2 took place, the KRS organization ended. The promoter from PRIDE 5 onward was the new DSE (Dream Stage Entertainment), and PRIDE cut a new start.

Under the new organization, broadcasting on Fuji TV also started. They built a coalition with K-1 and Antonio Inoki took up a spot as executive producer. Kazushi Sakuraba got his big break, becoming the "Gracie Hunter." Kazuyuki Fujita, Tokimitsu Ishizawa, etc., New Japan Pro-wrestling's flag carriers also kept coming to fight.

From Rings came the submission king, Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira, Dan Henderson, and as well, bouts featuring the man with a deep destiny with Sakuraba, Kiyoshi Tamura, came to fruition – it was an era of growth into a giant for PRIDE.

Not just in the PRIDE core itself, but also the Inoki Bom-Ba-Ye and Dynamite!, they worked together with K-1 to put on super-events. Rolling up New Japan Pro-wrestling and K-1, dream cards and giant projects progressed, flourishing on the one hand, but omens of the time of mayhem shortly to come could be felt with the 2003 New Year's Eve war between the organizations.

In this chapter, let us untie the string on the various experiments that came before PRIDE established itself as well as the projects involving K-1.

File 007

PRIDE plan to have three Tiger Mask fighters participate

Tiger Mask⁵¹....., the name forms a root that transcends eras, exciting fans in the pro-wrestling and fighting arts worlds. Back in the day, there was the time when Ikki Kajiwaras⁵² comics and anime made our hearts dance, then the original Tiger Mask stole our hearts, dashing gallantly into the New Japan Pro-wrestling ring, setting off a huge boom (and leaving once again like a hurricane), all the way up to today's fourth Tiger Mask who the young fans cheer on, that name and that mask must have a special mental effect.

And that mask was supposed to fly into PRIDE's ring as well! And more, three of them! What exactly happened?

The first person's name raised as a candidate was the fourth Tiger Mask, who is still working in New Japan Pro-wrestling. In the beginning of PRIDE, when on the good side, it had a lot of diversity, and on the bad side, it was

⁵¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiger_Mask#Professional_wrestling

⁵² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ikki_Kajiwara

flopping about unplanned and haphazard, they put together a plan for him to participate, fighting in MMA in the PRIDE ring.

The fourth Tiger mask's mask was originally produced between him and the first person to wear it, Satoru Sayama, saying, "I will make the real Tiger Mask with my own hands." He didn't step into the pro ring, but he gained a lot of experience training as a shooter at the Super Tiger Gym that Sayama spearheaded. He was a wrestler overflowing with genius pro-wrestling sense which Sayama recognized.

As the fourth wrestler, he also trained before his reappearance in NJPW with Enson Inoue, and they polished techniques together as comrades. With that hint of MMA destiny, they would later use him as a mediator to reach him and make an appeal for him to join them.

PRIDE at the time only had the heavyweight and the 93 kg-limit middleweight class. With the firmly rooted idea that "MMA with no weight classes is the finest thing in the world," it was a time in which the idea of PRIDE introducing the concept of lighter weight classes wouldn't have even been thinkable.

So, what was the 80 kg Tiger Mask looking for? He wanted a "PRIDE Junior Heavyweight Class" to be established. Not just that it would be small enough for him, but also it would show the special characteristics of the

lighter-weight world. Arguing that it would be necessary on top of the heavyweight class....., he would have been a well-qualified person to fill the role.

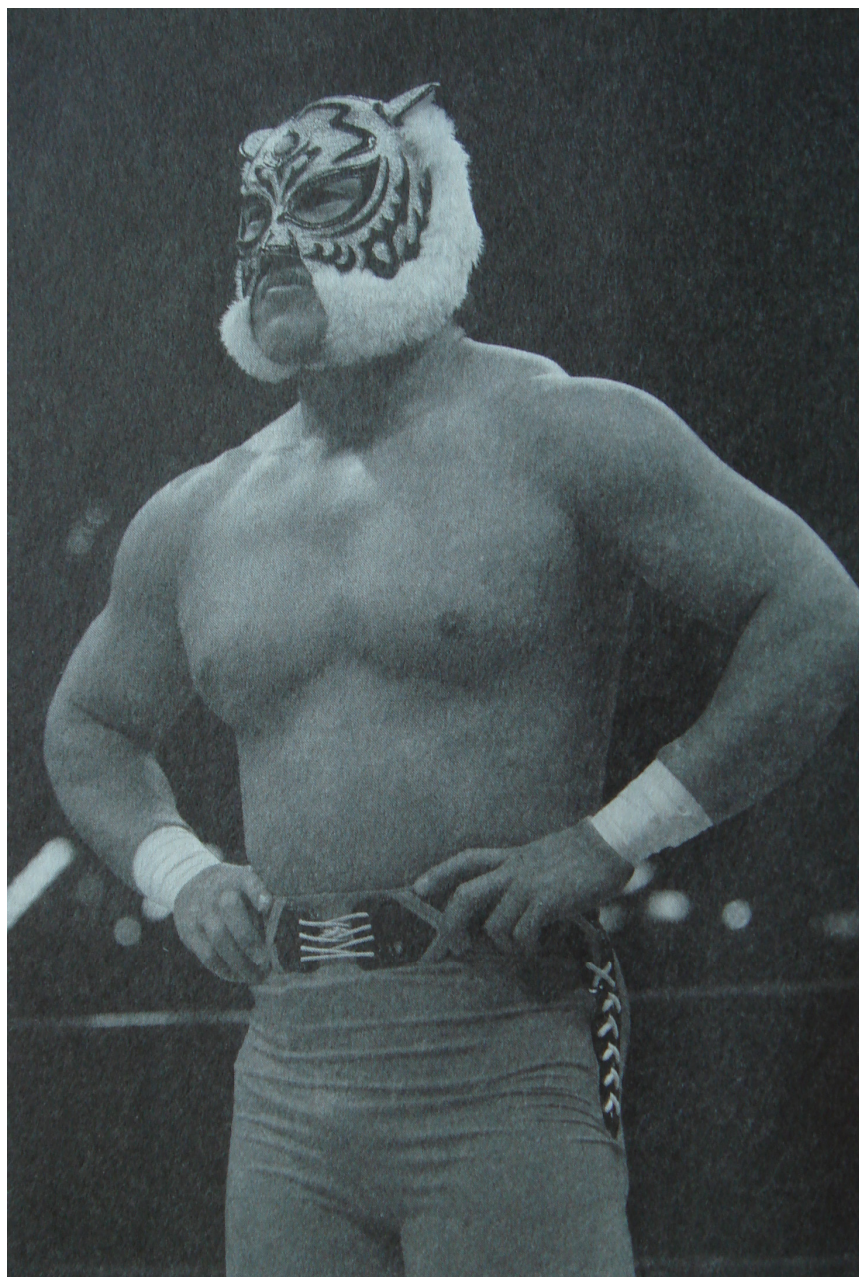


PHOTO – There were talks of appearing in PRIDE, but he went on to make his first appearance in NJPW January 2002. In May of the same year, he participated in “Best of the Super Jr.,” etc., the blown-over-quickly fourth Tiger Mask. If it had been materialized, he would have, faster than Dos Caras, Jr., been the first PRIDE mask fighter.

During the same period, the fourth Tiger Mask attached himself to Michinoku Pro Wrestling⁵³. As a favorite from the Tohoku⁵⁴ area of Japan, he enjoyed popularity, but soon the PRIDE talks started to make less progress, and he started raising up in NJPW, so it really wasn't a situation in which it would've made sense for him to move over to MMA.

The next time that the name of Tiger Mask was raised was in 2001. Strictly speaking, it wasn't a plan for PRIDE, but rather a plan for the New Year's Eve Inoki-matsuri with which PRIDE was connected in cooperation. The first Inoki-matsuri, put on the night just before the start of the 21st century, was an extravagant pro-wrestling event featuring a number of MMA fighters in force. After that, they corrected their course with the continuation – the K-1 vs. Inoki-matsuri concept event held in the K-1 ring in August of the following year.

However, the main force in Inoki's army, Naoya Ogawa, after repeated back-and-forths, didn't participate, and Kazuyuki Fujita, who lost by TKO in a powerful match against Mirko Crocop, was unable to participate, having been injured during intensive training in Thailand. With Inoki's army in a position where its members couldn't be decided, everything was in an emergency state,

⁵³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michinoku_Pro_Wrestling

⁵⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tōhoku_region

with the event pressing near and not being able to make even a single matchup.

Of course, now, having marched into battle in the huge 2003 Inoki-matsuri, and with the IGF⁵⁵ that never announces its cards until the very last minute, they are used to this kind of situation, but back with this 2001 event, TBS had just started giving them live broadcasting, so everything was growing paler day by day.

In the midst of this, the plan they came up with was to have Guy Mezger wear a mask, become Tiger Mask, and fight as a member of Inoki's army. To hear it now seems nonsensical, it must have been a plan made in desperation, but with things as they were, everyone was acting in a state of emergency.

This plan as well never came to pass (with Mezger as well not participating), but in similar desperation, Tadao Yasuda was made the main event, where he beat Jerome LeBanner, becoming the man of the hour with his moving parent-child story, but in the end, he didn't have what makes the fans want to follow someone's career.

The third was going to be the birth of a fifth Tiger Mask in the PRIDE ring, a considerably well-put-together plan. Just as Sayama's first Tiger Mask used a mixed media approach with the broadcast on television of the anime "Tiger

⁵⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inoki_Genome_Federation

Mask Satoru Nisei,” they had a mixed media plan to raise up their new Tiger Mask.

The pillar of the plan was to create a 21st century Tiger Mask anime and fit that in with the appearance of the real fifth Tiger Mask in the ring. On top of that, they planned to release the anime in America.

Ikki Kajiwaras Tiger Mask came along with Inoki and Baba and the other wrestlers in an unfolding drama, but in the 21st century, this wouldn’t work; Kazushi Sakuraba and Wanderlei Silva and the other star fighters’ stories developed. At the same time, it was hoped that the real fifth Tiger Mask would be actively fighting and building up experience so that the comics and the reality would miraculously merge.

And with that, they would need some very delicate personnel selection for who the fighter would be that would become the fifth Tiger Mask. Refined and polished muscles, eye-opening techniques and movement, and above all, the real ability to continuously win. In PRIDE’s unsparing world of dog-eat-dog win-or-lose battles, did someone exist that could fulfill those conditions? And the person that fit those conditions did come, the man who had just started fighting in PRIDE from February 2002, Kiyoshi Tamura.

They were able to clear the hurdle of getting the rights to use Tiger Mask and storyboards were made for the anime. As well, a mask made for Tamura to wear in MMA was created.

But the anime production suffered setbacks and the plan for the appearance of the fifth Tiger Mask died of natural extinction. Talks were progressing, leading in the direction of the fifth Tiger Mask's debut fight taking place in a PRIDE event in 2002 against Ryan Gracie, but in the end it was not to be. Tamura's second match in PRIDE, a mismatch against Bob Sapp, was born from the complicated sequence of events to create the fifth Tiger Mask.

File 008

Nobuhiko Takada's retirement match opponent was originally Naoya Ogawa or Hidehiko Yoshida

One of the major people of merit in PRIDE, Nobuhiko Takada. Takada opened the door to the history of PRIDE and opened the door leading to the road of the rise of MMA. He opened the curtains on the life of an MMA fighter and chose the PRIDE ring as his stage.

Takada, who fought against Kiyoshi Tamura in his retirement match at the November 2002 PRIDE 23 event at the Tokyo Dome, left behind a phantom anticipated matchup. Against "Running wild king" Naoya Ogawa. And it was originally planned that Takada's retirement match would be against Ogawa.

In 2000, PRIDE successfully held its first Grand Prix, its popularity rising like a good hill climb. Sakuraba was established as a complete star, and the momentum among non-Japanese fans was high as well. They made the right moves, like they were playing on a Go board, and the matchmaking had also improved to a level where there ceased to be

worries, but they were still holding onto one problem. That was Takada's retirement bout.

For Takada, who was leaving behind so many achievements, not just in PRIDE, but in the world of pro-wrestling and in the world of MMA at large, how would they decorate his last walk to the ring. As for a suitable opponent for his last fight, who should they use. And, the timing..... Given the importance of Takada, this problem included a number of important minute details.

Takada announced that he would retire in '02 after his fight against Mike Bernard at the New Year's Eve 2001 Inoki-matsuri. Looking at it from the viewpoint of his career, there was foresight that it wouldn't be so long, but to finally hear from the man himself a phrase like, "I'm going to go collect something I forgot" caused the timing and his opponent to enter the picture.

At the time, the very first name raised was Naoya Ogawa. Ever since Ogawa started fighting in PRIDE in 1999, he had been going about getting Takada riled. He kept asking for a match against him. At the press conference for the PRIDE GP, Ogawa burst in, throwing flowers (chrysanthemums) at Takada among other incidents. On his side, his stalker-like behavior increased. But Takada didn't bother listening to him, with no fight set as the days and weeks passed.



PHOTO – November 2002, the retirement bout held at the Tokyo Dome for Nobuhiko Takada. Here, Takada’s words to Tamura, “You are a man!” became a catchphrase, and from REBORN in 2003, as PRIDE’s executive producer, he took Inoki’s place, a living symbol of PRIDE.

But down under the surface of the water, a matchup between them was being planned. Neither of the fighters had objections to the bout as big Japanese warriors, and there was no intruding hand to stop the match from taking place. They called the November 2001 PRIDE 17 event at the Tokyo Dome "X-Day."

However, there came about an unexpected change in the situation. It was decided that Kazuyuki Fujita, who had just lost to Crocop in August, would be on the card. Because of the PRIDE-K1 coalition arrangements, after the August K-1 event, Mirko Crocop and Matt Skelton were being offered. But they couldn't find an appropriate opponent for Crocop.

Sakakibara said to Takada trying to persuade him, "This would be the time for you to fight Crocop." "He beat Fujita and now no pro-wrestler is stepping up against him, don't you think that's strange?" Crocop was starting to be called "Pro-wrestler hunter" and Takada's catchphrase was "I am pro-wrestler," Takada standing in the way of Crocop, it was a situation they could fully make a story out of.

Among PRIDE staff, some of them were wondering, "Would it really be okay if we did Takada-Ogawa?" If they were to make that match a reality as Takada's retirement bout, would that be optimal? And

Ogawa himself was conscious of the fact that this was Takada's retirement match.

So when Mirko entered the picture, they decided, "We should cut the Takada-Ogawa match." And while Takada was intent on retiring, those around him were saying, "There are a lot of things Takada has left to do," making them see the Mirko fight in a new light.

So with the remnants of the Ogawa match left in the background, the next possible opponent raised was none other than Hidehiko Yoshida.

Yoshida made his pro MMA debut at the August 2002 Dynamite! event at the Tokyo National Stadium. Having won the gold medal at the Barcelona Olympics, a brilliant achievement, this development became a worldwide topic. He would be a big name for Takada's retirement.

Thinking businesswise, Yoshida was the natural choice. Among staff, they also brought up Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira but thinking of the most appropriate opponent for his retirement, Yoshida seemed a better fit.

At this point, Ogawa's name wasn't raised, but neither was Tamura's. But as the preparations for the November Tokyo Dome event as the "Takada Retirement Celebration" came about, among the PRIDE

staff was the idea that they could close up the UWF's history in one bout with the unfinished business of having Takada face off against Tamura.

So it wasn't the "big business" match of Takada-Yoshida but the "distinction of right vs. wrong" match of Takada-Tamura. They wanted a match with "meaning" rather than a match with "money."

Getting both on board took time. First, Takada agreed and then he sent a letter to Tamura. Tamura took his time but finally said yes, opening Takada's letter after he agreed. He knew from the start that if he had gone and read it, he wouldn't have been able to not accept it.

Thus, Takada's retirement bout opponent was decided as Tamura. Kenichi Yamamoto and Hiromitsu Kanehara were in attendance, and Kazushi Sakuraba tied up the event in the main bout after Takada's retirement fight. In the corner were gathered familiar faces related to U-Inter. Understanding the spirit of the promoters, the fans completely filled the dome, and in the middle of that mass audience, they watched as Tamura, with his head shaved like a new religious adherent, KO'd Takada.

The audience swayed toward this magnificent suicide assistant⁵⁶. The related staff must have all thought, "These two were great." After all, Yoshida's bout wouldn't have brought about such an emotional development.

No matter that his consciousness had disappeared in the KO, Takada spoke to Tamura, "You! You are a man!" With this, it became not only next year's Generalissimo Takada's catchword but "Man!" [You're a man!"] also became the catchword of PRIDE. With this you can see Takada's unmatched sense. Right at the end as well, he leaves something behind. That was Takada's charisma.

⁵⁶ Kaishaku – a friend of a samurai that would assist in his seppuku/hara-kiri suicide by chopping off his head with a sword if he were unable to finish the disembowelment by himself.

File 009

“Confrontation with destiny” Keisuke Kuwata vs. Tsuyoshi Nagabuchi was really going to happen!?

Keisuke Kuwata⁵⁷ and Tsuyoshi Nagabuchi⁵⁸, no matter how you put it, are top stars in Japan’s music scene. Because of something that happened that will be mentioned later, they have a relationship between them like cats and dogs, so to get these two to perform together, no matter what television show or music event, would be very difficult. Those two performing together, no, facing off against each other, is what PRIDE came close to doing.

As in the beginning of PRIDE, KRS had connections to people in the music business, Miwako Fujitani and SHOW-YA among others were able to make music-related performances at events. If you ask whether that was because of the fans’ support, no, it was absolutely because this was one of KRS’ special abilities.

⁵⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keisuke_Kuwata

⁵⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsuyoshi_Nagabuchi

After DSE took control, such performances hid themselves away, but from an unexpected place there came something music-related.

The October 2000 PRIDE 11 Osaka-jo Hall event. The start of what transpired is that Kuwata came to the event. The plan was to go to the event to cheer on Ogawa for the television show Kuwata was putting on at the time, “Keisuke Kuwata’s Tora-san ~ Music Tiger ~” (Fuji TV).

Kuwata was a pro-wrestling fan from his early years, known as a big fan of Antonio Inoki, based in Chigasaki in Kanagawa prefecture where he was close with Ogawa. At the Chigasaki Gaisen live concert of the Southern All Stars held at the Chigasaki Baseball Park in August of that year, Naoya Ogawa appeared as a torch runner.

The TV programme plan was for Kuwata to pay his regards for the Chigasaki live concert and to root for Ogawa. Just that alone would’ve gotten people talking, but then he had also written a song that he was going to sing, and it became exceptionally bigger.

For PRIDE, it was like getting a gift you didn’t ask for, with such a famous musician coming for a TV plan, and if it’s Kuwata, the fans should be really warm to it as well, so no one would even think that anything would go wrong.

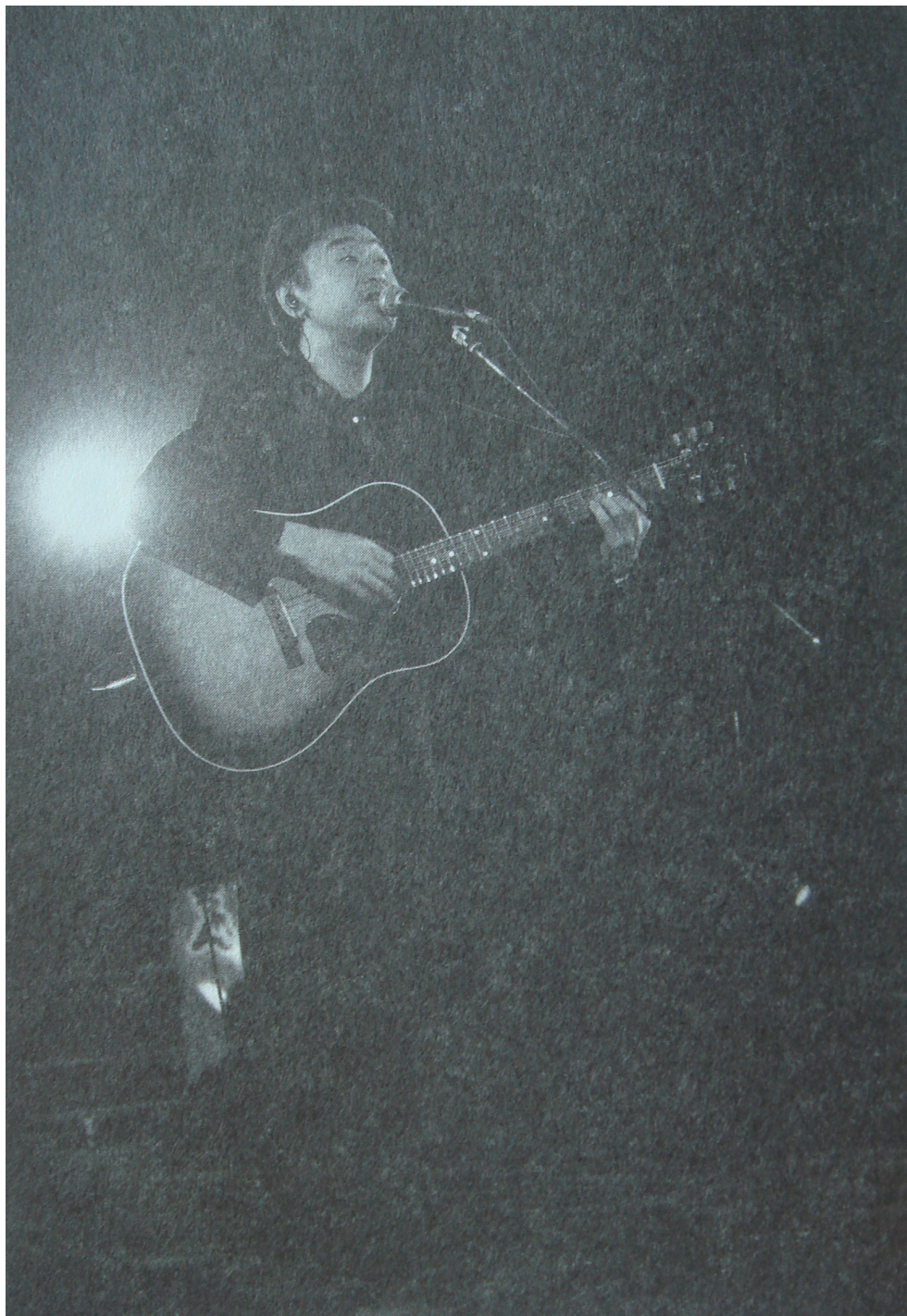


PHOTO – October 31, 2000 PRIDE 11, before the Naoya Ogawa vs. Masaaki Satake bout, drenched in the fans' cheers, Keisuke Kuwata singing, "PRIDE's Song ~ Chigasaki Thanks You ~." To be accepted this much by fans at an MMA event – only Kuwata.

But the one to respond with trepidation was the man fighting Ogawa, Masaaki Satake. Ogawa vs. Satake was being billed as a big-scale “Judo vs. Karate” match with two Japanese fighters. Satake, a Japanese ace who had left K-1 to become a PRIDE fighter at the beginning of the same year, had crushed Ogawa’s otoutobun⁵⁹ at the August Seibu Dome PRIDE 10 event. There was also the implication that this match would be to settle the grudge that had grown from that.

In this situation, Kuwata was thinking “To root for Ogawa because we are close, and Ogawa also came to my live concert” coming to the event, so naturally the song he would sing would be a “cheering on Ogawa song.” But Satake’s side found out about Kuwata’s “cheering on Ogawa” and felt exquisite delight, “If that’s so then we...” and they started making moves to have Tsuyoshi Nagabuchi appear.

There was secret strategizing in Satake’s group trying to get Nagabuchi as a confrontation with Ogawa getting Kuwata. Lurking underneath was the Keisuke Kuwata vs. Tsuyoshi Nagabuchi war that broke out in ’94. The lyrics “Repent for every song!!” from a solo album Kuwata released were making a mockery of Nagabuchi, and Nagabuchi let it be known with his criticism in interviews and the like. The rough connection between them had since performing together at a concert in 1983 was brought out, and Nagabuchi,

⁵⁹ Friend treated as a younger brother.

enlivened by the media, brought the grudge out (Kuwata's affiliated office printed an apology to Nagabuchi).

As a digression, it is said that Kuwata's lyrics were directed at Nagabuchi and Eikichi Yazawa⁶⁰. With Yazawa, the whole thing ended without him becoming aggravated. He also made a guest performance at the 2005 New Year's Eve Dynamite!! event. This was a group of people deeply connected with the MMA world.

Whether it was that Satake's side just felt a lack, or whether using their "Pro-wrestlers' heart" to make an angle for the fight with the rival connection between the singers, the real intention cannot be guessed. One thing that can be said is that if Nagabuchi were putting something out, Kuwata would have probably canceled.

It would have abused Kuwata's goodwill. The disconcerted PRIDE staff explained to Kuwata, saying, "It's not like we are doing a song war. It's simply a plan for TV. It's a shoutout for the two of you," somewhat getting a nod of approval.

Further, in making explanations to Kuwata's side, they asked for lyrics to be changed. To make some substitution and to also include Satake's name, gaining some control over the situation. Kuwata agreed which was good, but in

⁶⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eikichi_Yazawa

the future, to ask a big artist to change their lyrics is something of an outrage. If Kawata's and the Southern All Stars' fans had known, they would've gone red with anger. They had to take care about this to that level, so the promoters' hardships were far above the normal level.

The day of the event, Kuwata stepped into the ring that Kei Grant had introduced to him. Of course, he was greeted with great applause from the PRIDE fans. And with his guitar in both hands, he sung his heart out on his cheering-on song, "PRIDE's Song ~ Chigasaki Thanks You ~." You could see that his performance had raised this fight to the highest level, reflected in the eyes of the fans, but for the staff, given the sequence of events leading up to now, they were surely relieved once the song was over.

But it wasn't just Satake's side that had gotten riled. Kuwata, who had come as a great fan and to pay his respects ended up sucked into trouble from Satake's side and even had his lyrics changed, really getting screwed with. Ogawa being himself said to Satake, "You fuck, I'm never gonna let this go."

In the fight, that anger exploded. From round one, Ogawa led the fight, and in round two when he caught Satake in a rear naked choke, he forced the tap, but Ogawa wouldn't let go – that sure was Ogawa - adding in a punishment for Satake.

A simple TV plan ended up involving Nagabuchi without any thought, but with it, the emotional energy of the two exploded, leading to an exciting fight and a feeling that possibly everything worked out alright in the end. The singing performances to excite the crowd ended up raising the excitement level of the fight, leading to a rather rare occurrence in MMA history.

As well, this live performance of “PRIDE’s Song ~ Chigasaki Thanks You ~” was paired as it was and released with the big hit song “Surfing Johnny” which had sold 1.1 million copies.

File 010

The first to produce a reality show, too soon, before "TUF"

These days, if you were to ask which American MMA organization boasts the most popularity worldwide, it would of course be the UFC. What first made the UFC so popular was "The Ultimate Fighter (TUF)," a reality show based on raising fighters.

On the show, these young "egg" fighters are incubated, dorming together, being taught by famous fighter coaches, aiming to get their chance in the octagon, and it gave birth to stars including the popular light-heavyweight champion Forrest Griffin. And as the seasons went by, they included one for returning veterans as well. It made MMA fighters popular with TV viewers.

In recent years, people from all corners have been asking, "If Japan did a PRIDE reality show, wouldn't it have made it popular here, too?" but in reality they had such a show from many years back! "PRE-PRIDE" and (later) "PRIDE KING" broadcast on Toyo TV.

The main concept was events for amateurs from throughout Japan to get into the PRIDE ring and audition to move into the PRIDE organization. Started in Autumn 2000, "PRE-PRIDE" became PRIDE-OU [PRIDE KING] in April of the next year. This beat out TUF by more than four years.

The collection of fighters started and they went to various gyms for two months of evaluation and training. The coaches were Japanese PRIDE fighters. In the first round, they included Masaaki Satake, Daijiro Matsui, Akira Shoji and Alexander Otsuka.

Based on the evaluations, they were put in an 8-man tournament, the first event taking place in December 2000 at a club in Shibuya. There were no public ticket sales, viewers of PRE-PRIDE could see it on television. The people that watched it were surely hardcore fans.

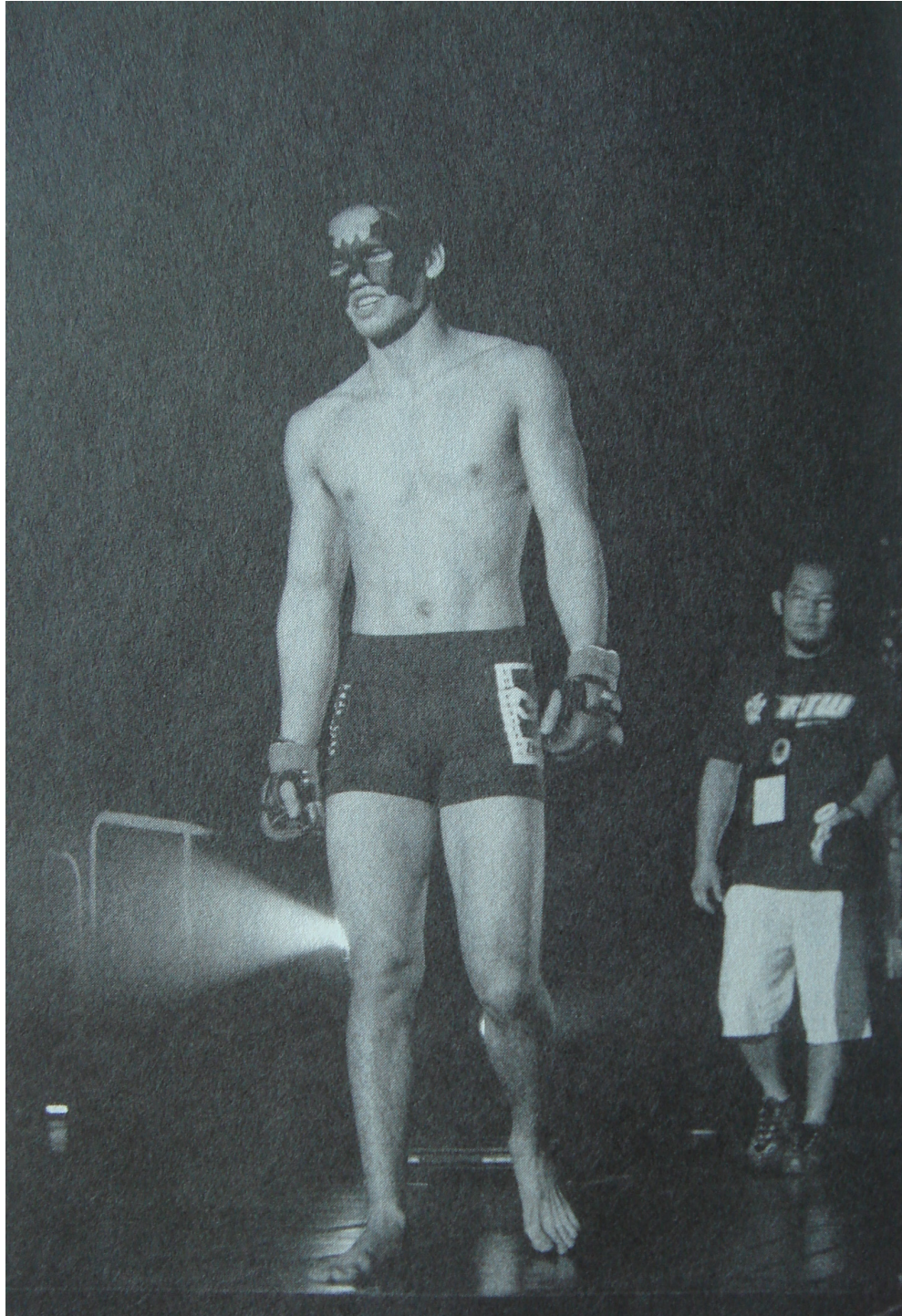


PHOTO – Now a major leaguer in MMA, vying for the middleweight belt in the UFC, Yushin Okami. He was also a “PRE-PRIDE” fighter, and when he fought in “MMA THE BEST,” for some inexplicable reason, he wore a Batman mask to make his entrance.

It came much earlier than TUF, and perhaps because this reality TV format was a good technique for variety shows, the PRE-PRIDE idea was taken and used inside a popular corner of a famous variety show, "Gachinko!" as "Fight Club" (Starting within 2000 like PRE-PRIDE. It featured former boxing champion Ginichi Takehara⁶¹ and others raising young men to be pro boxers).

Or it could go back to Japan's older reality TV show representative, Morning Musume⁶² or maybe Asayan⁶³ put out by Chemistry⁶⁴.

The winner of the PRE-PRIDE tournament, naturally, would move up into the real PRIDE ring as the prize, and obviously the fighters in PRE-PRIDE wanted to go into PRIDE, but the winner of the first tournament, for some reason chose Rings for his debut, then fought in THE BEST, and finally, he was scheduled for a third fight but withdrew, and with that, he ended his career in MMA, having never actually fought in PRIDE.

That said, fighters in PRE-PRIDE can be seen in various places. For example, the winner the second time, Soukun Koh, has fought in

⁶¹ Unknown if this is the correct name.

⁶² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morning_Musume

⁶³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asayan>

⁶⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chemistry_\(band\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chemistry_(band))

Sengoku, the winner the 4th time, Yushin Okami, went on to the UFC vying for the title. As well, the fifth winner, Katsuya Inoue, went on to become a Pancrase champ.

As further examples, the semi-final winner of the 2nd tournament went on to become the rule director for HERO'S and CAGE FORCE. "Anglo-saxon Oba" who also eventually fought in the PRIDE ring was in PRE-PRIDE during the second run along with Mitsuoka. It turned out a number of talented people all over.

Looking at the names of the competing fighters above piques one's interest but why did the tournaments only bring out Wajyutsu Keisyukai fighters. Like in the second tournament, the winner was Mitsuoka and the runner-up was Isono, meaning the final of the tournament featured two guys from the same camp.

Because of a special connection between the show and Wajyutsu Keisyukai? No, simply because at that time, Wajyutsu Keisyukai at the amateur level had a head up in power. As an aside, at the sixth and final event held as well, Wajyutsu Keisyukai's Shinpei Sotoyama won.

To go back to what was talked about before, did those fighters that graduated from PRE-PRIDE go on to any activity in PRIDE? Unfortunately, the answer is, "no." Only Mitsuoka and Okami went once each to the

main stage for a "Bushido Challenge" bout. The opening bouts of Bushido, these Bushido Challenge matches, can of course be labeled, "fought in PRIDE!" but there's also something dubious about it, and besides that, these two were better than that, and Sotoyama and Inoue were not even given the opportunity.

The PRE-PRIDE show went on for close to six years, but suddenly ended when PRIDE lost its contract with Fuji TV in June '06. The fall of the curtain really came too quickly.

A reality show gimmick well before TUF, and with PRIDE's reputation of, "don't pour strength into the amateurs, just pluck them away from the organizations that raise them up" – looking at this way in which PRIDE had been judged, PRIDE did actually have an amateur department that might have given people a better impression, the truth of the matter is that because of weak linkage with the main trunk of PRIDE, even the existence of this class had been forgotten completely by everyone involved.

By the way, PRIDE also had a one-off amateur-finding series called "PRIDE Challenge." The winner, Cristiano Kaminishi, also never went to fight in PRIDE.

From the start, developing an amateur class requires breaking ground and needs to be performed laboriously, but even then, PRE-PRIDE was developed all the way into a TV show, so why did it fail?

At the height of PRIDE's popularity, if it had been a regular broadcast on terrestrial television, it might have raised even more awareness.

To speak honestly, it is because the television program was restricted to the Chubu region by only being on local Toyo Television. There was a time when it was also broadcast on Samurai TV, but nothing there triggered a lot of talk among fans. Or maybe if they had stayed local but in the Kanto region, instead, things would have been a little different. At least, it would have had to have made as much noise as TV Tokyo's "Sengoku G!"

File 011

The PRIDE that wasn't PRIDE – "Ultimate Boxing"

PRIDE's legacy, ten continuous years from 1997 to 2007. Throughout the process, there was a lot of trial and error. This huge event was maintained for a decade, incorporating the relatively new idea in business of increasing in magnificence over time. And of course, not everything ended up successful.

In the midst of trying out all the possibilities, a number of affairs were virtually consigned to oblivion. The PRIDE that wasn't PRIDE..... This representative example started in June 2000 with "Ultimate Boxing - Opening Bout" and ended with "MMA THE BEST" that happened only three times, in 2002.



PHOTO – Called “The man who does things ten years ahead,” Satoru Sayama put on “Ultimate Boxing” in connection with PRIDE in June ‘99. It was still the era in which MMA was centered on ground fighting with the illusions of the Gracie family, but now, MMA is focused on stand-up fighting. It was an event that may have predicted this, but alas, too early.

But first, Ultimate Boxing, held at Yokohama Arena. All eight bouts were held under Ultimate Boxing rules, 3 three-minute rounds with Masaaki Satake winning by decision over the Russian Denis Bodrychan⁶⁵ in the main event.

Each of Dick Fry, Pele, Giant Ochiai, Ebenezer Fontes Braga, Tachihikari, PRIDE fighters (well, “having the experience of fighting in PRIDE” is probably more accurate) took on a Russian fighter in their respective matches.

First, we run into the puzzle of what were “Ultimate Boxing rules?” These were original rules used by Satoru Sayama in his new organization Seikendou.

Seikendou employed a number of unknown powerful fighters from Russia, working on a heavily busy schedule to make provincial tours, exerting effort seriously day after day centered on these rules to open super fights to the world, an amount of activity that is hard to imagine today. As well, in the intervals between bouts, Sayama would wear the Tiger Mask and work some pro-wrestling and suddenly from there a number of gorgeous Russian women would take the stage to start dancing voluptuously, it was considered a legendary organization by pro-wrestling otaku⁶⁶.

But, it isn't like they could continue on like this – this amount of activity would surely lose its velocity. And in the midst of this, for some

⁶⁵ Unsure of correct spelling.

⁶⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otaku>

reason, DSE announced their connection, and this event was held, dressed out in the name, "PRIDE vs. Seikendou – Full-out Battle!"

DSE handled the burden of all of the production of the event, and it is said that at first the card would be filled with PRIDE's top-class fighters. The problem was that the PRIDE GP 2000 finals were happening just about one month later and the Nagoya PRIDE 9 event was happening a week later, leaving none of the famous fighters available (although the main event in the Nagoya event was Vitor Belfort vs. Gilbert Yvel, a rather bog-standard event).

That said, it seems that they were looking to have drawcard Wanderlei Silva fight, but that as well was not to be.

Even though the event was held at such a large venue in Yokohama Arena, the fact that it happened has been erased from the minds of nearly everyone. There were even opinions like, "Rather than the fights, it was Sayama's never-ending meandering speech to greet the audience that left the largest impact," and while the event was supposed to start something new, perhaps it did, in that its "mixed rules emphasizing standup fighting" has come to be the norm in today's MMA.

In the midst of BJJ being praised extravagantly, these new rules were created by one man, Sayama, who, after all, was probably 10 years too early.....

And one more thing that disappeared from the history of PRIDE – “MMA THE BEST.” As a PRIDE sub-event, it started in February 2002 but as a small-scale event, they held a second event at Kourakuen Hall in July and finally a third event in October at Differ Ariake.

PRIDE’s top fighters didn’t appear in the event, with the shows being built around young fighters, novices and foreign fighters that were making their debut in Japan or had limited fighting experience in Japan, and winners from the PRE-PRIDE shows. That said, the main event of the first outing was Yusuke Imamura vs. Joe Son.

This was the debut bout in Japan for Imamura, from Takada Dojo, and Joe Son became famous as the manager of Kimo in the UFC as something of a colorful character. Somehow, Imamura cinched a standing armlock just 33 seconds into the match forcing the tap. It was a match made solely to inspire gossip.

The biggest special characteristic of this event was the 8-sided ring they created for it. Not the fencing of the UFC octagon, 8 posts with ropes stretched between, introduced to try to stop fights from getting

stalled in the corners. There was talk that the main PRIDE events would also use the ring if it turned out favorable, but it ended up just being used for these three events.

Later, in the second event, the man who'd gotten a huge boost from Kazushi Sakuraba, Antonio "Nino" Schembri, and Alistair Overeem also competed, and in the third, fighters produced by Yuji Shimada and Booker K (Kouichi Kawasaki) competed, with Shimada's side including Mongolian Top Team's "Mongol 300" (planned but he dropped out) along with other plans in a true feeling-out process. And with this, down came the curtain.

It was explained that from the beginning, because the main PRIDE events were being broadcast on Fuji TV, this event was made for Toyo TV that had been delay-broadcasting PRIDE in the Chubu region. Looking at the original planning papers for MMA THE BEST, the slogan for the event was, "Blood, Energy, Sweat, Tears." Even so, with the fighters and match results it gained, it was a bit far from "best."

There was a strange influence no one would have guessed. This was probably the first time the term "MMA" had been used for an MMA event in Japan, and shortly thereafter, DSE registered MMA as a

trademark. From that point on, any newcomers to the game would be unable to use “MMA” in their name.

Because of that, it is said that there were some events that needed to change their names. Even now, in America as well, it is not VT (Vale Tudo) but MMA that is in common use, but back at that time, in 2002, “MMA” was far from pervasive. It must be said that registering “MMA” first showed clear foresight.

It breathed a short life, ending after just three events (the results were not even posted on PRIDE’s official website), but the concept of raising up fighters and working with experimental matchmaking was taken over and reborn in PRIDE Bushido.

PRIDE Fighters' Unknown Stories 3

Tatsuya Kawajiri

"The Yoyogi Shooto event was a full house, so I don't think it was a mistake to rise up to fight in Bushido."



PHOTO – Tatsuya Kawajiri. Born May 8, 1978 in Ibaraki prefecture. Made his pro debut in Shooto in 2000. Beat Vitor “Shaolin” Ribeiro to become the #8 Shooto welterweight champion. Fought in PRIDE from May '05. His fight with Takanori Gomi was considered fight of the year. Took 3rd place in the 2008 lightweight GP. 171 cm. 70 kg.

Interviewer: As I understand it, your bout hasn't been decided but you are training? (this interview was recorded in September)

Kawajiri: Well, I just recently started it up. I was finally able to take a break after the DREAM lightweight GP. I was just chilling throughout August.

Interviewer: I heard from someone that you did your first scuba diving during that break.

Kawajiri: Have you done it?

Interviewer: Yes.

Kawajiri: It was like that.

Interviewer: I can't get anything with that kind of answer (laughing).

Kawajiri: (ignoring) I'm not really the type to do that sort of activity. I lost the fight against Eddie Alvarez, and I thought I wanted to try something out of the ordinary.

Interviewer: Doesn't it put you in an environment where you can devote yourself to a match as well as let you relax?

Kawajiri: Yeah, probably that.

Interviewer: The theme for our interview is PRIDE, so looking at yourself from the outside, did they create a similar environment?

Kawajiri: Yeah, that was probably the biggest achievement.

Interviewer: When you started MMA, did you think you'd be able to make a living just doing that?

Kawajiri: No way.

Interviewer: Really, you thought so, didn't you?

Kawajiri: Why would I lie?

Interviewer: No, it's just that you have a lot of confidence...

Kawajiri: That's not really true. There was really no one making it in my class (-70kg). At that time, it was basically like Rumina Sato.

Interviewer: So it was a feeling like you were entering into a group of likeminded peers?

Kawajiri: Yeah. And working with something that's close to your interests, I felt myself getting better and better and I suppose that's how I went pro.

Interviewer: Had you been working at the time?

Kawajiri: Part-time, yeah. I started MMA in university, and once I graduated, I was at a time of wondering whether I should start looking for work or not - I figured if I lost my second fight I would start looking for a job to start my career.

Interviewer: Hm, you lost your first fight, right?

Kawajiri: Yeah. But my second fight was a draw.

Interviewer: You were safe⁶⁷ but it was a close call (laughing)!

Kawajiri: If I had lost there, I planned to just do MMA as a hobby and start looking for regular work.

Interviewer: If you had lost the second match, what kind of occupation would you have gone into?

Kawajiri: Hmm. At that time I didn't care, whatever it was was fine with me. But even if I went with MMA, at the time I was thinking to put a stop to it when I turned 25.

Interviewer: So following your second debut match you set yourself a further hurdle.

Kawajiri: Yeah, if I wasn't getting the results I wanted by 25, I was thinking of becoming a police officer. And then, I'd be wearing the police hat with Aoki

⁶⁷ The baseball term.

(Shinya)⁶⁸ (laughing). After all, maybe being a public servant is better. A policeman or a firefighter.

Interviewer: And the government would foot the bill (laughing). So, that you didn't become a civil office worker or a cop turned out for the best didn't it.

Kawajiri: Yep. Both of my parents are civil servants. At the time, watching the both of them, I thought that having a stable job is best.

Interviewer: But really, when you were 25.....

Kawajiri: I was already approaching the level to fight for the belt in Shooto. So I was like, "Well, let's give it a try a bit more." "Maybe I should continue in MMA a bit longer..."

Interviewer: When did you feel a response to you that you'd be able to make it in MMA as a living?

Kawajiri: Of course it was when I was going to fight in PRIDE.

Interviewer: Oh, it takes that long?

⁶⁸ He uses the Japanese suffix –kun implying a friendly relationship.

Kawajiri: Yeah. I quit my job working part-time in a videogame arcade before my fight in Shooto against Uno (Kaoru). It took some serious resolution to quit. It was during the time when I was trying to make something happen before I turned 25 and I thought that if I lost to Uno then basically it would all be over. At that time, I resigned myself to it and put myself into circumstances where I wouldn't be able to make any excuses.

Interviewer: Were there also times of personal difficulty for you?

Kawajiri: Well I live in my parents' house. So compared to someone that lives by themselves in Tokyo, it's not bad at all.

Interviewer: Did you get feelings of pressure from your surroundings?

Kawajiri: Pressure? Like, "Do a respectable job like everyone else" or something?

Interviewer: Right.

Kawajiri: Yeah, there was that. Especially from my parents. My mom wasn't even happy about my ears getting smashed up.

Interviewer: Your mother didn't really have an idea about what MMA is, right...

Kawajiri: Yeah, at first it was like that. But after she started coming to see me fight in the events, to see it live, she started to really root for me. In the

beginning, it was like, whenever our eyes met, “When are you going to quit?” and I’d say, “For the time being, please just let me do it until I turn 25.”

Interviewer: But it wasn’t until PRIDE that you started to be able to pay your bills this way.

Kawajiri: Yeah, that’s really true. From PRIDE.

Interviewer: Was one of the reasons you stepped up into PRIDE that you wanted to make a living this way?

Kawajiri: More than making a living I felt I wanted an environment in which I could focus on MMA, and yeah, of course I thought about my future. There are people that are like “MMA isn’t about money” but for me, money is also one of the important things in life. For people saying things like that, I think they are people that have been blessed with something. Like, if they can’t make it with their fight money, they’re working as coaches or running a gym.

Interviewer: Or the sponsors or patrons are really strong...

Kawajiri: For me, I don’t really have that much backing. Of course with the pride of being a pro, I want the money, and I think it’s important to have an environment in which you can focus on MMA so you can become even better.

Interviewer: How did PRIDE look to you as a Shooto fighter?

Kawajiri: Hmm, well if you say PRIDE you say the world of heavyweights. I didn't think one bit about being in it – even if you say we were both doing MMA, it wasn't in any way the same, not the same stage, I guess you could say it wasn't our stage.

Interviewer: Like a completely different world. So... when you thought of PRIDE as a completely different world, what were you thinking about how to make a living in MMA?



PHOTO – September 25, 2005, PRIDE LWGP 1st round, his “summit battle” with Takanori Gomi made reality, both fighters unwilling to pull a single punch, it was a match that made its mark on MMA history. It wouldn’t be going too far to say that this one fight established lighter-weight Japanese MMA.

Kawajiri: Hmmm. At the time when I hadn't yet thought of going to PRIDE, I was just thinking to give it a go to a certain degree then become a cop. You can easily become a cop at 28, right? So, I thought it'd be good to do it til that age and then look for a job. When was it I went into PRIDE Bushido...

Interviewer: October 2003.

Kawajiri: Oh?... I was just 25 then.

Interviewer: So if Bushido had been even just a little late in hoisting their flag.....

Kawajiri: I probably wouldn't be in MMA

Interviewer: Another safe but close-call (laughing)!

Kawajiri: Yeah, shit, that was close (laughing)! Around that time, guys in my own weight class like Mishima (Dokonjonosuke) were debuting in PRIDE Bushido, so I was thinking maybe if I made it on that stage I could make it in MMA as my occupation.

Interviewer: So, Bushido came into your field of vision as your target.

Kawajiri: Yeah. The PRIDE ring was where everyone wanted to be⁶⁹, so to be on that stage, if they would do bouts in my weight class, I was thinking I'd really want to fight there.

Interviewer: What stands out for me is that after you went into Bushido, you went into the Yoyogi Daini (Taiikukan) Shooto event to fight a title match against Joachim Hansen. Before the start of the event, you really seemed interested in the fans entering in, frequently looking over to see the situation, weren't you.

Kawajiri: Yeah. As Shooto champion, for my part, wanting to move up into Bushido, I was thinking of trying to raise the excitement of Shooto, hoping for a full house. There was the significance of going into another ring as Shooto champ, that point was on my mind. So while the results were bad (no contest due to a low blow), the fact that the Shooto event was sold out for me marked a sort of end for me. I don't think it was a mistake to rise up to fight in Bushido.

Interviewer: Besides being able to support yourself, were there any other dramatic changes in your move up from Shooto to PRIDE?

Kawajiri: I got more fans. I became more known. That really dramatically changed. And my being picked up by and my handling by the mass media became completely different.

⁶⁹ Akogare - to long for, to yearn after, to admire, to be attracted by.

Interviewer: Did you get any sort of complex from being in such a major organization? Takanori Gomi was you could say motivated by it, right.

Kawajiri: Not for me. To be honest, it's the same now but my feeling of wanting to please the fans has been strong since my debut, my first MMA match. I'm happier hearing "It was really interesting" than winning and hearing "Congratulations," and I've never really thought I wanted to become a popular person or famous. Instead, when I first appeared in PRIDE and the amount of people that know who I am really increased, it was hard for me rather than it being a happy thing.

Interviewer: Hard for you?

Kawajiri: Really, I was just thinking I wanted to be left alone. At the time, my surroundings had basically violently changed, and because of that stress, it negatively affected my physical condition. I couldn't relax. I'm maybe a bit shy or a bit slow to get used to being around people, so for some reason, when I started in Bushido, stress really built up.

Interviewer: When a person starts to get more known, well, many fighters seem to excessively thrive off it⁷⁰.

Kawajiri: For me, it's just the opposite. I get twisted up, a feeling like, "I'm not doing MMA because I wanna be famous," and I'd feel all twisted up, there

⁷⁰ Like a "tengu" or demon.

was a time like that. Now, I've come to finally be kinda used to it, maybe able to be thankful for the circumstances.

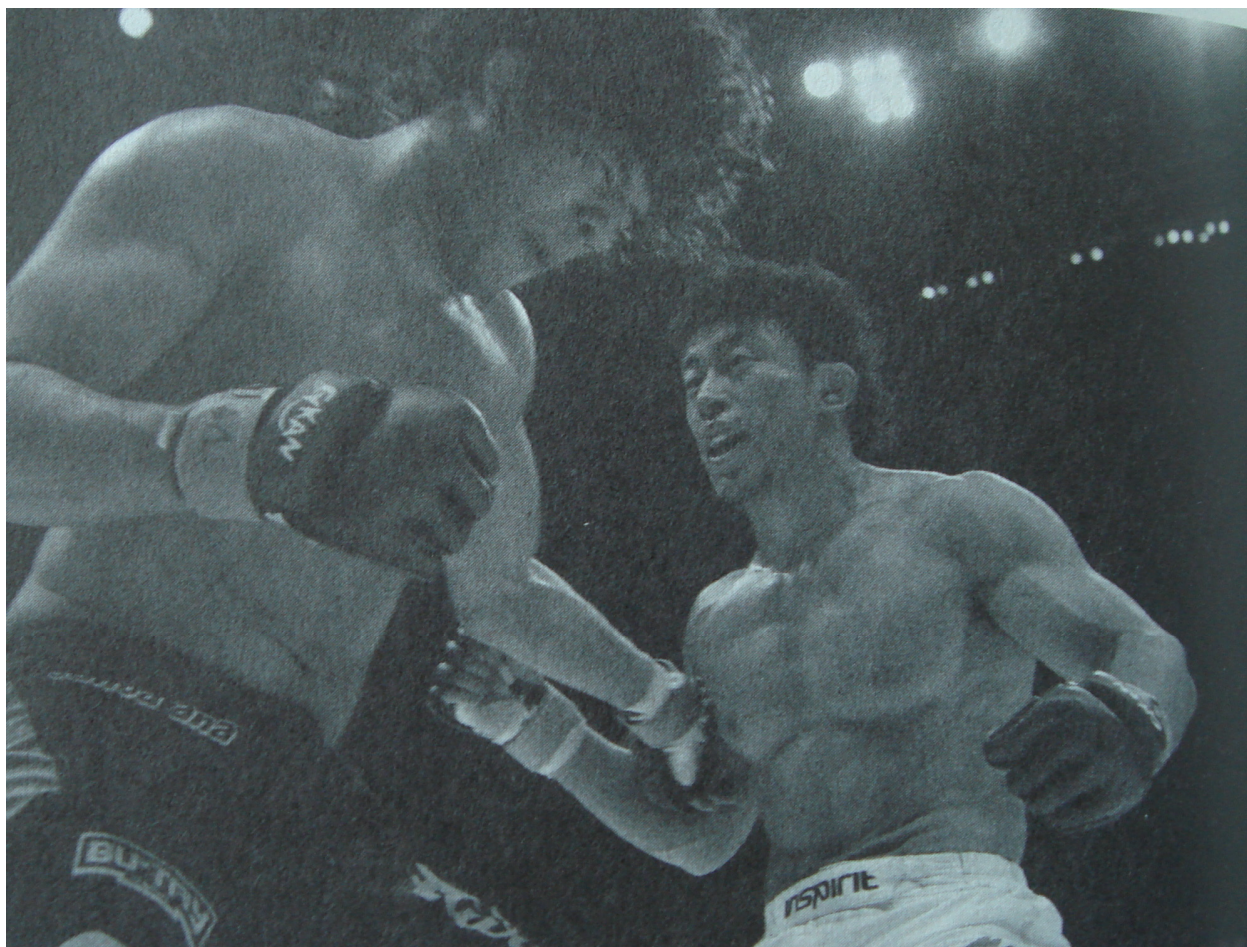


PHOTO – The 2006 New Year’s Eve ring, “Otoko-matsuri,” Kawajiri fighting against Gilbert Melendez. The fight was an amazing matchup with Kawajiri losing a really close decision as his popularity continued on into DREAM.

Interviewer: That happened in PRIDE, didn't it.

Kawajiri: Yep. PRIDE was the ultimate, in everything, everything about it.

Really, it was amazing to the point that nothing was left out. I always say it but the way the staff treated the fighters, we really felt from every single person in the staff there a really high level of motivation and energy like, "We are making PRIDE!" It was really a blessing to be a part of it, on such a big stage working to make something together with the staff. Because every single person was looking toward the same thing, the same goal, and altogether we formed like a giant wheel.

Interviewer: To be thrown into that environment, the fighters really want to put on an amazing performance, don't they.

Kawajiri: Absolutely. I really felt the sense of being a pro. Altogether, it was a feeling of, "There's no way I can put on a shit match in this ring," something like that. I want to give the audience even more satisfaction. I had that feeling before then, but in PRIDE, it grew all the more stronger in my thoughts.

Interviewer: On the other hand, you had a bit of competition chaos with the PRIDE matches. What are your thoughts on that?

Kawajiri: Yeah..... Like, I think the establishing of the lightweight class came also because Gomi was so good, I was thinking like, the lightweight class could get recognition as a class of its own if we could put on a good fight together

that really excited the fans. It was hard to accept the 73kg weight, if you think of the whole world, 70kg is the standard, so it was like, "73? Eh?"

Interviewer: I suppose because it's exactly under the 93kg middleweight line...

Kawajiri: Well there was also that, but I think when Bushido came about, the PRIDE staff started to feel out a direction of competing with PRIDE. I'm just saying what I'm thinking at the moment. The new things come, there's ambiguity, it was all happening sort of in the moment. It all came together, I think, or like, the problems just disappeared. Rather, I worked so I could fighter at both 73 and 70.

Interviewer: And in the matchmaking, there were a lot of matches made for entertainment, right.

Kawajiri: But in Bushido, there really wasn't much of that. I didn't feel it a bit. So, there were no complaints. Rather, being able to fight where the best guys from all over the world were gathering, that was happiness.

Interviewer: So far, talking about the sins and virtues, the virtues have been huge, but if you had to talk about the sins, what do you think of?

Kawajiri: Ehh, what could I say... To reverse it, could you give me an example?

Interviewer: Nah, I never fought in PRIDE (laughing).

Kawajiri: I guess like, maybe the matches made with a ridiculous weight difference?

Interviewer: Well, that doesn't really have too much of a sin quality though.

Ah yes, what about losing the live broadcast deal with Fuji TV?

Kawajiri: Ahh, I didn't really understand. What the truth was, I mean should a fighter try to go into that deeply? Maybe even to ask would be bad.

Interviewer: Didn't you become uneasy?

Kawajiri: Not really. To be honest, at that time, I didn't personally know what a big thing it was that Fuji cut us off. Like, "Only TV is gone, right." The audience will still be able to come and see us, so no problem.

Interviewer: Despite PRIDE being cut off by Fuji, the fights and matchmaking and all of that didn't really change, did they.

Kawajiri: Right. I didn't understand the money involved either so I thought nothing would really change.

Interviewer: But that's the impression most fighters had, right.

Kawajiri: Yeah. The fighters don't know about stuff like the inner workings. So for me, PRIDE was nothing but a good experience. It really was the greatest.

The only pain in the ass was, like I said before, the sudden explosion in the amount of people that knew me and all of that, and I wasn't sure what I should do. In Shooto and in PRIDE. It's like what I'm doing doesn't change. What I'm thinking doesn't change, nothing in the foundation, the principle aspect of what I'm doing has changed, just that the environment surrounding it all of a sudden changes.

Interviewer: That's a positive thing, a happy thing, isn't it.

Kawajiri: Happiness!

Interviewer: Dahahaha. Lastly, can you sign this as a present for a Kamipro reader contest?

Kawajiri: Sure.

Interviewer: By the way, when did you first start signing autographs?

Kawajiri: Ah..... that was once I started in PRIDE (laughing).

Interviewer: Thanks a lot!

Chapter Four

REBORN – Era of PRIDE on the Path to
Be the Strongest in the World

From June of the same year with PRIDE 25, Nobuyuki Sakakibara took on a representative role and the new organization started things moving once again.

That event, PRIDE 25, was given the subtitle, "REBORN." Just as it says, from this event, PRIDE was born again. If you ask what changed, the biggest difference would be the severing of its previously close ties with K-1, standing on its own for the first time.

Somewhat coinciding with REBORN, Mirko Crocop, who seemed fed up with the way K-1 had taken to a "monster route" focused on the likes of Bob Sapp, started to fight with earnest in PRIDE. From here also the sankyoujidai⁷¹ reign of the heavyweight class was reborn with Fedor Emelianenko and Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira, and the theme of PRIDE came to be "One in six billion – the strongest man."

Along with the new heavyweight era came the fierce battles of Wanderlei Silva, Mauricio "Shogun" Rua and Quinton "Rampage" Jackson, with representatives from Japan, Kazushi Sakuraba, Hidehiko Yoshida and Kiyoshi Tamura, entering into the fray.

In this chapter, we will look into the peak of PRIDE, when it also received primetime broadcasting on Fuji TV.

⁷¹ Era of the three kingdoms in China – the emperors being Herring and later Crocop, Nogueira and Emelianenko http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Kingdoms

File 012

The imperial edict of battle sent out to K-1: Mirko vs. Herring

PRIDE's REBORN era, one of the most important fighters was inarguably Mirko Crocop. Having tasted humiliation so many times, but always coming back really moved the fans of Mirko. And the pinnacle of that was the 2006 absolute GP tournament victory.

Originally a K-1 fighter, what caused Mirko to try his hand at MMA was the 2001 "K-1 vs. Inoki Army" battle. In the K-1 ring in Japan, Mirko fought against Kazuyuki Fujita in an event held in August. Winning a bloody TKO by way of a knee, he surprised the fans with his dominant victory, and he went on to represent the K-1 army against the likes of Nobuhiko Takada, Kazushi Sakuraba and Yuji Nagata, being given the nickname "Pro-wrestler Hunter."

And the start of Mirko's career as a PRIDE fighter came with the June 2003 PRIDE 26 fight against Heath Herring. Having fought up to now under special rules including five rounds of three minutes each, Mirko was now fighting under standard PRIDE rules. Herring was, at the time, among the top three emperors alongside Fedor Emelianenko and Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira, but lost to Mirko via KO from a middle kick.

Surprising the fans once again, he broke out of the frame of “The K-1 fighter destroying nothing but pro-wrestlers,” rising up into the ranks of the elite veterans in MMA.

And this wasn’t just big for Mirko, it resulted in major changes in the world of MMA. Putting together this fight was PRIDE’s declaration of war against K-1. K-1, having suffered from then director Kazuyoshi Ishii’s imprisonment, was moving ahead making a new organization, and on the PRIDE side as well, the death of DSE’s Naoto Morishita left president Sakakibara and chief Takada working to build the new REBORN version of PRIDE. In the midst of these moves, PRIDE bid farewell to K-1 and took Mirko with them.

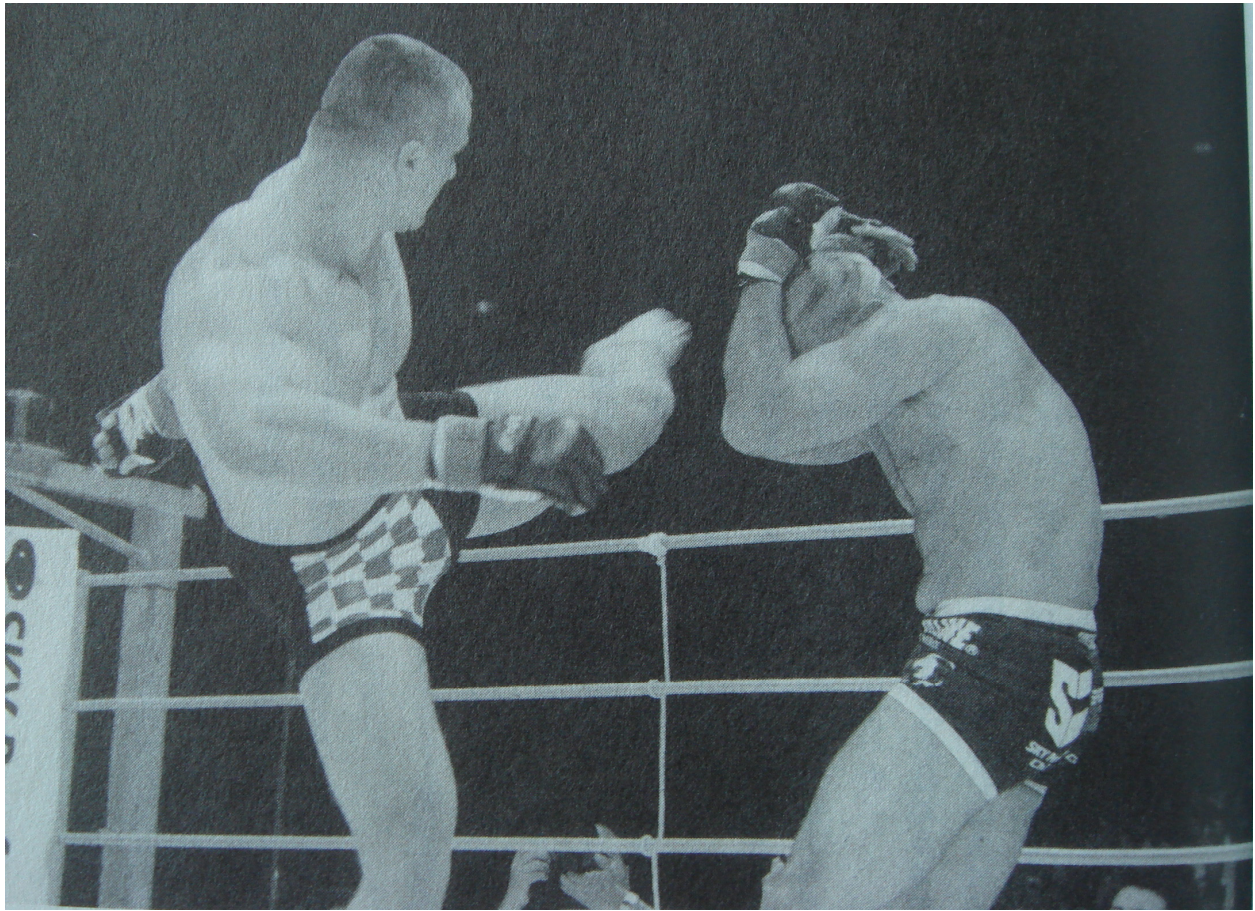


PHOTO – June 2003, PRIDE 25, Mirko vs. Herring. In actuality, this was Mirko's first fight under standard PRIDE rules, but he overwhelmed one of the three emperors. Looking at the way Herring is covering up his face, it is evident he was afraid of Mirko's strikes.

To date, Mirko's representing manager, Kenichi Imai has taken on heavy responsibility to manage broadcast contracts with the TV stations and athlete contracts in K-1. He also headed K-1 USA. From then, Mirko has had a very deep interdependent relationship with him.

In 2003, Imai working in an important position in the new organization of K-1 would not be out of the ordinary, but amidst the troubles of creating the new K-1, Imai decided to part ways. Now, there's Mirko, who thought he was going through this together with Imai.

On the one hand, Mirko at that time was active in MMA and his concentration on it was growing. On the other, it is said that K-1 was working on the expectation of using him up before he could just leave a champion.

With that background, the next match made was for March of the same year, a K-1 rules bout pitting Mirko against Bob Sapp. Sapp was at the peak of his career at that time⁷². The previous year, under K-1 rules, he defeated Ernesto Hoost twice by KO. In MMA as well, he came within inches of KO'ing Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira. To see that Sapp hit Mirko, to drop Mirko's value, it seems that that was the plan behind this fight.

However, Mirko was finely tuned to and sensed that atmosphere, and it is when something like that happens that Mirko displays his real ability and power. His left straight flew into Sapp's face, or rather, hit him right in the eye, killing a would-be avenger and giving the audience a KO. It all got thrown in reverse, with Sapp holding his face, looking about to cry, and Mirko sending

⁷² A Japanese saying literally translated as, "the power to drop a flying bird."

Sapp's value plummeting through the canvas.

And in June, it came to be that Mirko faced Herring in PRIDE. At the same time as this being Mirko's true parting from K-1, as was mentioned above, it was also a farewell bid or a declaration of war from PRIDE to K-1.

Mirko left K-1 that was trying to damage him and decided to make PRIDE his main battleground. And without even talking with K-1 about it, he decided to agree to participate in the PRIDE match against Herring, and without the K-1 people even knowing, the fact that the match was decided was told directly to the Fuji TV staff.

Of course, as Fuji TV also was broadcasting K-1 live, people related to K-1 within the station also heard the news. Those people looked at the fight card in astonishment. The atmosphere in the room went ice cold in an instant.

It was then that the PRIDE and K-1 split was decided. And it wasn't just the problem related to Mirko. There was a huge reason for PRIDE.

From this starting point, PRIDE (not divulged publicly) was in a position where K-1 had no small influence. It of course helped in PRIDE building a position in the MMA world, but in ways PRIDE also had to play a role as something of a lower organization.

For example, in the Inoki Matsuri and Dynamite held at the national arena, the main actual work corps administrating the events was DSE. And K-1 took the main leadership on the business side of things, and as well, live

coverage was provided not by Fuji that was broadcasting PRIDE, but TBS which was broadcasting K-1 MAX.

To break this deadlock, there was no other way but to press on alone. Without borrowing K-1's power, while avoiding being influenced by anything, to move on to create a new PRIDE. That was the goal⁷³ of the new REBORN organization. And the announcement of that goal was the decision to have Mirko vs. Herring.

The person that decided that it would be Herring to face Mirko was Imai. "If he does it, he'll be one of the three emperors." This was a strategy by Imai to have Mirko's birth as a PRIDE fighter make an enormous impact.

At the same time, he also thought, "of the three emperors, it should be Herring." Of course you could say he was well-rounded, but like Nogueira's grappling skills or Fedor's ground-and-pound, Herring didn't have a particularly piercing weapon. If he used that idea, he would definitely win.

And that was Mirko's strategy, right from the start, up until the KO with a left middle kick. Before the match had ultimately been decided, Imai had flown to Holland, with his connections from the K-1 days, to secretly meet with Stefan Leko. Stefan, a Croatian who emigrated with his family from Croatia and who now had a German-issued passport, had feelings of alliance with Croatia. There, Imai made a daring request to Leko. During striking sparring with Herring at Golden Glory, "let a punch really go to his face, let him know

⁷³ mokuromi - plan, scheme, project, program, programme, intention, goal.

the damage it causes.” He wanted to teach Herring that for an MMA fighter, strikes from a K-1 fighter are a real threat.

With punches coming, more than a K-1 fighter would, an MMA fighter will start thinking about protecting their face and raise their guard. But if they guard the head, the body is wide open. Then you just attack the middle.

Just as planned, Mirko KO’d Herring. He took one magnificent step in his quest to the top of the heavyweight division. But this was a prologue in the ever more complicated affairs of PRIDE’s declaration of war against K-1. Both organizations after this went after each other’s fighters, and because of that, the fight money went through the roof. And New Year’s Eve of that year was waiting, with the unprecedented chaos of three separate groups putting on events.

File 013

The mysterious end to "The Beast" Kazuyuki Fujita's fight in the UFC

The main cause for the end of PRIDE's activities. That was, after all, the UFC. Due to the UFC's big break, the fight purses having increased, and the loss of the support of Fuji, PRIDE found itself driven into a corner.

To put it simply, the design of the MMA business in the US and Japan was too different. And PRIDE, driven into a corner, was then purchased, also by the UFC, more specifically, the Fertitta brothers.

But, up until then, the UFC and PRIDE had had a close connection. Before the UFC became a major success. There had been good competition between both organizations' fighters, and they were, in ways, it could be said, partners. The power of PRIDE was necessary for the UFC which wanted to begin a full-scale Japanese advance, and PRIDE, with its dreams of advancing into the US, saw clues in the UFC as to how to gain a foothold. But they weren't keeping the same pace.

First, let us look at the assassin fighters the UFC sent to fight in PRIDE. In the PRIDE middleweight GP in 2003, Chuck Liddell fought. Liddell, with his KO victory in the August opening round over Alistair Overeem, fell in the

semi-finals in the November final event to Quinton “Rampage” Jackson’s pounding. And again in the 2004 heavyweight GP, Gan McGee appeared, suffering a total defeat against Semmy Schilt.

Liddell and McGee. Not absolute champions but definitely not bad fighters. Both fighters had firm positions in their respective divisions (Liddell in light-heavy, McGee in heavy), both staple fighters of the UFC.

But, they were at the time only known to a few of the most hardcore fans in Japan, and their entry into PRIDE would create no buzz. You could feel a difference in the heat of the world of mats between the US and Japan.



PHOTO – September 26, 2003, UFC 44 put on in Las Vegas, Sakakibara, Takada, Fujita appeared in the octagon. Dana White, UFC president, and UFC owner Fertitta. Photo taken during hopes of exchange, but in the end, Fujita didn't fight in the UFC.

PRIDE, facing the UFC, what kind of fighters did it send? None. To the end, not a single assassin from PRIDE set foot in the octagon.

In reality, negotiations had been progressing. In return for Liddell's participation in the middleweight GP, there was a natural plan for PRIDE to send a fighter to the UFC. In September of 2003, for a meeting at the Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas UFC 44 event, DSE President Nobuyuki Sakakibara and General Director Nobuhiko Takada along with Kazuyuki Fujita flew to the US.

They watched the event and there remains a photo of them along with Dana White and Lorenzo Fertitta in the octagon. The plan was for Fujita to fight in UFC 46 in January of the next year.

The reason Fujita was selected to represent PRIDE was based on a simple idea, as Sakakibara explained, "Fujita's like a gorilla, right? So it fits to put him in a fenced enclosure." Well, there was also the fact that as he was progressing in MMA, Fujita had been training in Seattle, and now as well is training at the Marco Ruas dojo, based in California, and he was a strong fighter. It is said he was positive about fighting in the UFC.

There was one reason this plan never came to fruition. Matchmaking. As Fujita's opponent, the UFC pointed to Wesley "Cabbage" Correia.

Correia, whose name can be seen in connection with the American K-1 event, was a UFC fighter at this point in time. He was by no means a top fighter, but in the highly competitive atmosphere of American MMA, he was a suitable opponent for Fujita's US debut.

But, looking at it from Japan, Correia was an unknown among unknowns. There was no balance with Fujita. As well, PRIDE was hoping for Fujita to face a UFC champion, believing they had to make a mark for the PRIDE brand on American fans.

UFC heavyweight champion of the time, Tim Sylvia, failed a steroid test and was stripped of the belt. That being the case, have him face a top contender like Frank Mir and shortly after get to the top, the champion's seat. That was the plan. Even if he beat Correia, he would move up in a competitive sense, but there would have been none of the necessary impact.

As well, a bit later came a plan for Sergei Kharitonov to appear in the UFC, but this too never happened. This time, it was the UFC that refused. The reason: "Nobody wants to see a no-name Russian guy. And because he's good." The UFC only realized the value in the marketplace of Russians and Brazilians, non-American fighters, some years later, when Fedor Emelianenko and Mauricio "Shogun" Rua were showered with acclaim at the Las Vegas PRIDE event.

UFC and PRIDE, how far their senses ran counter to each other. PRIDE's plan to cooperate so the UFC could put on an event in Japan was also put on hold because of this. And then came an offer from the UFC for Kazushi Sakuraba. Destroyer of members of the Gracie family, Sakuraba had big name value in the US. But from the PRIDE side came another name – Hirotaka Yokoi.

Looking at it from PRIDE's perspective, "We're supposed to just loan out a top fighter like that!?" Even with Liddell competing in the middleweight GP,

there was a recognition like, "Well, yeah, if he wants to go, then he should go."

At the time, Japan didn't know the US nearly well enough. And it was the same for the US regarding Japan. At the 2003 middleweight GP, Dana, Lorenzo and Randy Couture came to the event. "If Chuck loses, Randy will go next." It seems that was the plan. However, if Couture had appeared, it cannot be said whether he would have been a draw for the industry.

The irreconcilable differences have actually continued well up to the present. After PRIDE was purchased. At the start, the plan was for UFC fighters to fight in the PRIDE lightweight GP and for live broadcasting of UFC events in Japan. But the UFC's belief was, "If we just send the UFC stars, it'll go over just like that in Japan as well." There is no way the negotiations would have been settled without understanding the actual situation in Japan. And it was decided then, that the Japanese offices of PRIDE FC WORLDWIDE, what became American capital, were to be locked up.....

File 014

UFC's plan to invade Japan – they had Mirko in mind

2006, on New Year's Eve, Japan time, the announcement of Mirko Crocop fighting in the UFC had a huge impact on the fans. Up until then, the UFC had been prospering and the American MMA industry had expanded, and at the same time, Japan had entered a crisis, but this announcement is what made people really feel it. And this "Mirko Shock" was connected with the sale (transfer of control) of PRIDE in March of the following year.

Mirko fighting in the UFC came about from his genuine desire to step up as a fighter, holding onto his dream of wanting to conquer both PRIDE and the UFC. In actuality, the year before, 2005, there had been a plan for Mirko to fight in the UFC. But that is not to say he was leaving PRIDE to go to America.

That year, the UFC had plans to re-enter Japan, and Mirko was to appear in that event as a PRIDE fighter. The stage was to be Yokohama Arena on June 12.

For the UFC that hadn't yet gotten its big break, the Japanese market was a must, they needed to push into this hotbed of MMA. Really, the UFC had been to Japan before, starting in 1997 with its Yokohama Arena event (at that point, it wasn't Zuffa but rather SEG that was in control), then curtailing in

1999 at the Tokyo NK Bay Hall, and in 2000 at the Yoyogi #2 gymnasium and Differ Ariake. That is, the reason for the curtailing was that they were not succeeding.

That same UFC started planning a re-entry in 2004. This time, they were aiming for an event in December of the same year.

Preceding that, Dana White announced at the August UFC 49 event that he would be going to Japan. In the main event, Randy Couture, UFC light-heavyweight champion, won and called out Wanderlei Silva from the spectator's seats to come to the octagon – a proposition for a double title match.



PHOTO – UFC in Japan for the fourth time. The April 2000 Yoyogi #2 gymnasium event was held in the UFC number series as UFC 25, making reality the fight between Wanderlei Silva, before his big break, and Tito Ortiz. However, since Zuffa took the reins the UFC has yet to return to Japan.

Of course this all had all been planned out. Would Silva, who was under contract with PRIDE, just go without notice (and holding the PRIDE belt) into the octagon? PRIDE's cooperation in the UFC returning to Japan was evident. But, PRIDE was in its golden days then. PRIDE not holding the UFC, before its big break, in high regard would take another paragraph.

The UFC, not receiving enough cooperation from PRIDE, abandoned its plan for the December 2004 event in Japan. Once again, they re-planned, and this time they were aiming for a June 2005 event.

For this, they received cooperation from Japan's leading boxing promotion, which was also connected with the UFC's live broadcast on WOWOW. With the backing of a sports newspaper company, they would put on UFC 53 at Yokohama Arena. This plan went as far as to reserve the venue.

That said, with all the failures up until this point, it became clear in the end that they needed a Japanese star. And who had been working in cooperation with the boxing promotion but Mirko's representing manager Imai.

In August of that year, it was decided that Mirko would get his chance at the belt and at his heart's desire in a matchup against the man holding the belt, Fedor Emelianenko. At an important time like that, for Mirko to go into the octagon under different rules must have been a huge decision.

It goes without saying, even though Mirko would be fighting in the UFC, it didn't mean he was moving to the UFC. He was entering with the blessing of DSE president Sakakibara.

At the time, Mirko was already a star in PRIDE, so of course it was also a complicated decision for Sakakibara. Imai, connected with Sakakibara, came to him saying, "If it's only one time, it should be alright. Just for Mirko, maybe we don't have a choice" to which Sakakibara agreed, getting closer and closer to the UFC's return to Japan and Mirko's participation in the UFC.

But from there, all movement stopped. No profit was expected from the event. As expected, sponsors didn't really gather around it, and the organization itself decided to cancel.

To think this through, Dana and Lorenzo's view on things was half-hearted⁷⁴. Getting the help of a Japanese promoter was wise, but the venue was Yokohama Arena, a huge venue. They would be bringing the American package all the way there. Preparations would take much more time and money than normal. To say nothing of Mirko competing. The fight money for that was among the highest in the world.

To pay the expenses, they would have needed to fill Yokohama Arena. For that reason, Mirko would have to be in the mix. However, putting Mirko in the mix would raise the expenses.....

The UFC couldn't escape this vicious circle. If they had gotten a live broadcast on terrestrial TV, they might have been able to scrape by with the TV rights, but the UFC was still an unknown event in the mainstream of Japan, and with WOWOW being their only broadcast media option, it wouldn't even be normal considering the industry for them to have stayed in the black.

⁷⁴ Amai – honeyed, indulgent, optimistic, slack.

Prepared to go into the red to hold an event in Japan, Dana and Lorenzo Fertitta are romanticists, aren't they (the UFC wouldn't be the success it is in the US if they weren't). Going forth to put on an event without a lineup prepared, their conceit probably didn't allow them to excuse the severe criticism they received compared with K-1 and PRIDE.

Finally, Dana and Lorenzo decided to pull out before the official announcement, and Mirko's UFC debut in Japan became a phantom. If Mirko had competed in the UFC this time, and fought once taking the UFC belt, if that dream had been granted, how would things have changed?

The end of 2006, perhaps he would've remained with PRIDE that was on the brink of disaster. In that case, he wouldn't have lost to Gabriel "Napao" Gonzaga and Cheick Kongo, and his glorious history might have gone on untainted. Or maybe in the end he would have moved to the UFC.....

File 015

The trick up PRIDE's sleeve to face Akebono at Otoko-matsuri was Evander Holyfield

In PRIDE's history, the most deeply confused, complex and bewildered time..... That is, without doubt, the end of 2003. Under a cooperative arrangement, holding the NYE's big event "Inoki-matsuri," it came to be three different organizations holding three different events, and three television channels showing the three different MMA events live.

Among those three events, the one winning by a landslide in terms of the number of people talking about it was Dynamite!! After all, former Yokozuna Akebono who was given his debut in K-1 was going to face Bob Sapp who was at the pinnacle of popularity at the time. By the way, this one match peaked at 43% viewership, eclipsing the ever-popular Kouhaku Uta Gassen⁷⁵.

To battle against this Akebono vs. Sapp extravaganza, PRIDE's hidden ball trick, looking so probable at the time, was "the man who crushed Mike Tyson," Evander Holyfield.

From the start, the standard in the fight world for New Year's Eve was

⁷⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kōhaku_Uta_Gassen

PRIDE's Inoki-matsuri. This year, the REBORN PRIDE from June, having separated from K-1, joined forces with Antonio Inoki (who then held the title of PRIDE executive producer) to cooperate in making Inoki-matsuri. Inoki made a comment, "This year, we will go out to you from the highest mountain." This "highest mountain," in other words, "Fuji" – they planned to go live on Fuji TV.

TBS & K-1's Dynamite!! and Fuji TV & PRIDE & Antonio Inoki's Inoki-matsuri – a one-to-one fight. Just as it was thought it would come to that, Inoki made an unexpected move. He joined with Seiya Kawamata, who was connected with K-1, moving to put Inoki-matsuri on Nippon TV.

At the start, Kawamata presented to Nippon TV a card consisting of Yoshihiro Takayama vs. Mirko Crocop, Kazuyuki Fujita vs. Peter Aerts, and Hidehiko Yoshida vs. Naoya Ogawa. As well, Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira, Wanderlei Silva and Fedor Emelianenko were planned to appear (however, who ended up appearing were just Fedor and Fujita).

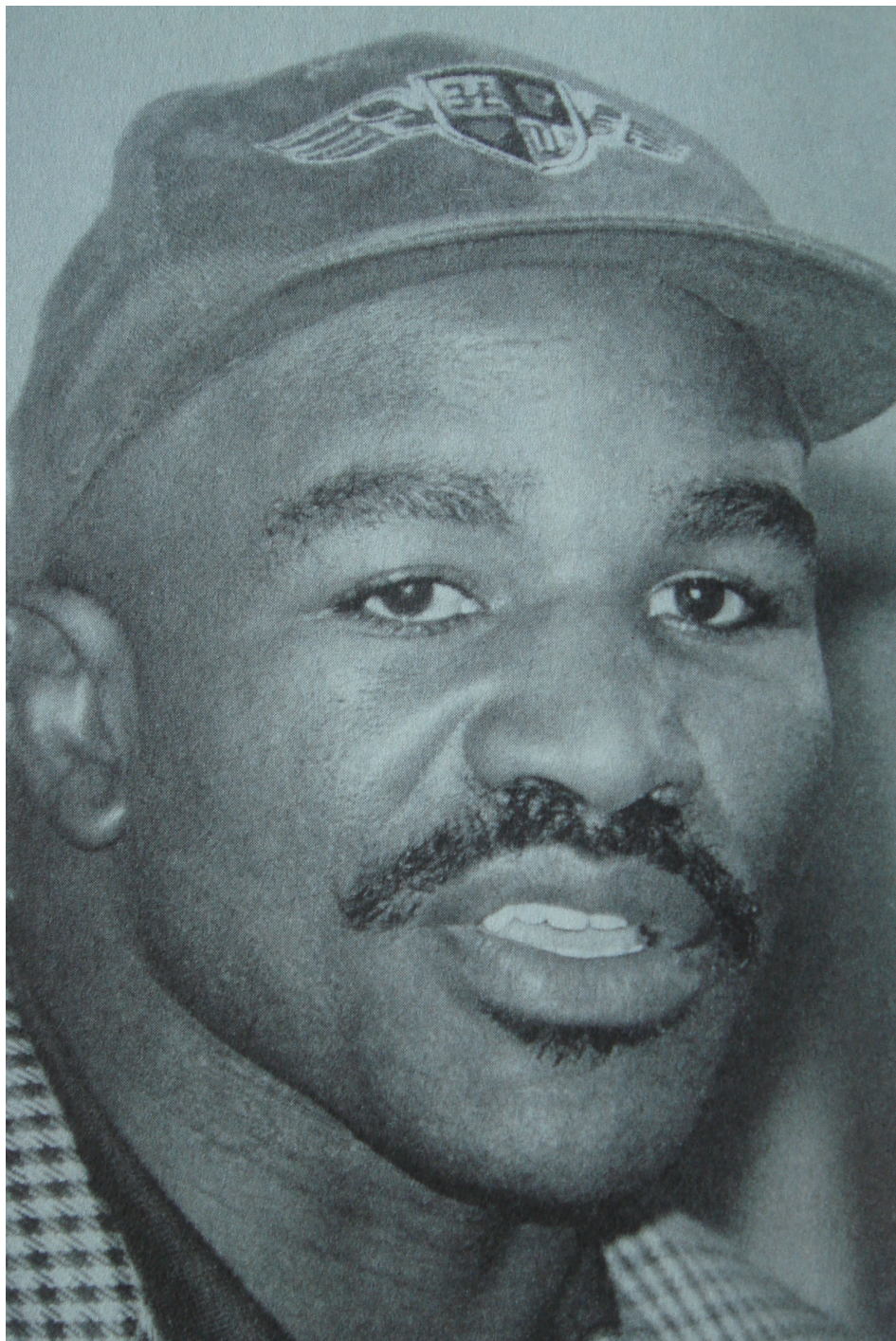


PHOTO – Evander Holyfield, five-time WBF champion. Not only did he TKO “the” Mike Tyson, he became famous for getting bit by Tyson in their rematch. There would be talk, in other words, he was a perfect fit for NYE, but his participation in PRIDE was never realized.

On the one hand, PRIDE's response to this was "goodbye." At the November Tokyo Dome event, chief Takada had proclaimed, "We won't chase after those that leave!"⁷⁶ Until the end, they would walk their own path.

That said, PRIDE threw everything it had into the November event at the dome. The finals of the middleweight GP, the Mirko-Nogueira championship bout, the return of Sakuraba – PRIDE was basically out of gas once this event ended. Further, Inoki-matsuri had gotten big money for the TV rights with Nippon TV and was fishing for big fighters like Fedor and Mirko among others. The idea of a PRIDE NYE event – broadcast by Fuji TV – could be seen floating in mid-air, about to fly away.

But, Fuji TV insisted on PRIDE going ahead with an NYE event. Or maybe it was the willpower of both Fuji and PRIDE. But the fight card was a problem. Just having put on the November show, and yet, they also needed to protect their headlining fighters from Inoki-matsuri. With this kind of start, they absolutely needed to put together some matchmaking appropriate for Fuji TV's golden time⁷⁷ slot.

Including rumors, the planned matches for PRIDE's Otoko-matsuri 2003 were many. First on the list was Kazushi Sakuraba vs. Kiyoshi Tamura. However, due to Tamura's refusal, this match was cancelled. There was also an idea to have Tamura vs. Nogueira, which Tamura was interested in, but Nogueira couldn't participate, and it was never announced.

⁷⁶ saru mono wa owazu – a Japanese proverb meaning we will go our own way, do our own thing, find our own happiness.

⁷⁷ Japanese primetime – 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.

The previous year, Nogueira competed in the Inoki event "LEGEND," (defeating Sanae Kikuta by KO) creating controversy, and he became something of a problem in the behind-the-scenes of the industry. Perhaps due to his condition or maybe due to business considerations, he didn't participate in a number of events this year.

In the end, Tamura faced Ray Sefo's brother Ronnie, but there had been another candidate opponent for him - Holyfield. The best of the best in the boxing world, four-time world heavyweight champion, Holyfield.

Known as the victim of the Mike Tyson "ear biting incident," he was a name boxer in the 90's who garnered great respect. In recent years, he became a representative of boxing. That Holyfield, why was there a plan for him to fight in PRIDE?

In actuality, Holyfield's name had been raised in gossip within the PRIDE organization from the early days. The story started when PRIDE was still run by KRS, with PRIDE 1, and the representative coordinator, a karateka named Hiroki Kurosawa, who adored Holyfield (he even got the same "be humble" tattoo as Holyfield).

At meetings and such, Kurosawa was always mentioning Holyfield.

And at the same time, Holyfield's management (concerning non-fighting affairs) was operating in Japan. This company, which had booked many famous sports athletes for TV programmes, was at a time also Rickson Gracie's management.

With those connections, PRIDE had been close to touching Holyfield for a long time. Touching” doesn’t mean the level of negotiating, but as acquaintances or becoming acquaintances. As well, it is known that the DSE USA office had succeeded in getting a meeting with him.

That said, no matter how you look at it, it was a threadlike connection. From the Holyfield side, with the related people and promoters, there must be too much going on to even enumerate and no time for such a weak connection. Not to mention the idea of a big name American boxer of his caliber going to Japan, and further, into an MMA ring, was an impossible thing.

But PRIDE’s way of doing things was not to be put off by the impossible, not to mark limits on what they could try in planning. In the first place, having almost nothing, they were able to put together Rickson vs. Takada.

Before and after this, PRIDE proceeded with trying to get boxers. As touched upon later, Masamori Tokuyama, and Antonio Inoki had had meetings with Sugar Ray Leonard. Further, there were rumors that Oscar De La Hoya had interest in MMA, to which the question “Well then, will he fight in it?” was asked in PRIDE meetings.

De La Hoya’s interest in MMA, it turned out, was as a promoter, but if you just try to think up a plan, increase the possibilities, that is what the story of PRIDE is, isn’t it.

File 016

Kazushi Sakuraba to become Maskman!? The plan to introduce Saku-machine

As mentioned before, it was a rough path to creating the matches for the 2003 Otoko-matsuri. Already having split from K-1, and now Fedor Emelianenko had been pushed and pushed until he finally agreed to fight in the Inoki-matsuri. Further, Mirko Crocop and Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira were absent from a number of events.

Nevertheless, they had to put on a big event worthy of New Year's Eve so the people involved were worked to their limits. Amidst all the work, among a number of matches they had drawn up, there was a plan for Kazushi Sakuraba to fight as Maskman.

Yes, the legendary scene of Sakuraba entering the ring in his fight against Royce Gracie, one highlight of PRIDE, the debut of Saku-machine.

At a time like this when forming bouts was causing so much trouble, what is called upon is something that can be adjusted easily, and further, as a business decision, make it a Japanese fighter to increase even more the fans' love for PRIDE.

As a fact, among the ten fights put together overall for this year's Otoko-matsuri, eight of them featured Japanese fighters, one of them being Hayato "Mach" Sakurai vs. Daiju Takase (a fight pitting middleweight Japanese fighters against each other was quite rare for PRIDE at the time). And the big draw of the event was supposed to be Kazushi Sakuraba vs. Kiyoshi Tamura.

Discord between Sakuraba and Tamura had continued since their U-Inter days, or to put it bluntly, there was a personal grudge. At this time, it was such that while Sakuraba was not a big fan of being pitted against Japanese fighters, only Tamura was a special case, "someone to hit bare-handed." Of course, whether the match was actually going to happen was a different problem in itself. Instead, it could be a situation of, "I don't even want to see his face," where the match would be refused.

Sakuraba's answer to the Tamura fight offer was a yes. In the middle of the rivalry with TBS' Dynamite!! and Nippon TV's Inoki-matsuri, the match was decided for the reason of "getting people to talk about it." It would prove well on the business side and show the fans the "man among men."

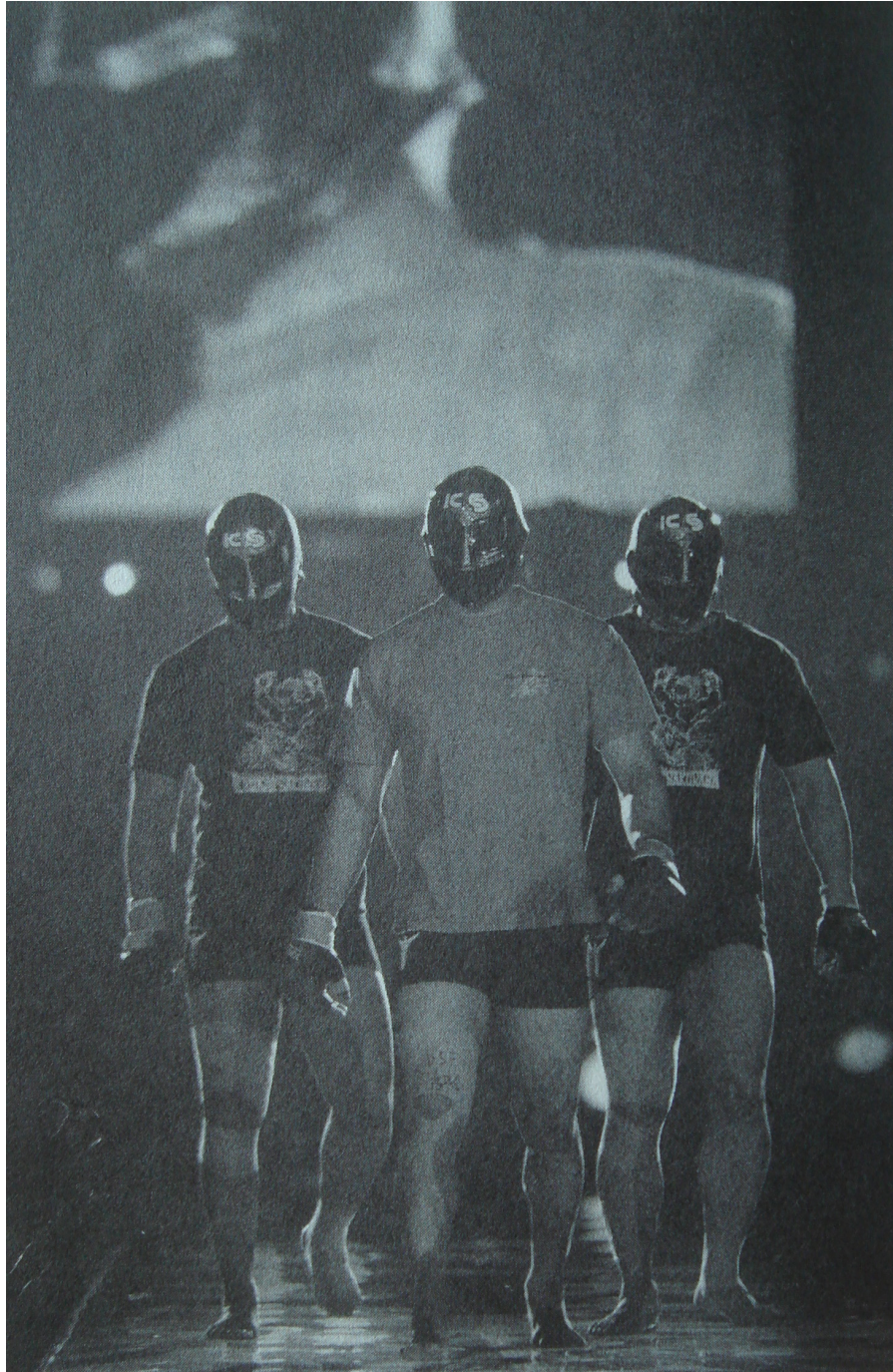


PHOTO – In the history of PRIDE, one outstanding entrance, his fight against Royce Gracie, Kazushi Sakuraba’s “Saku-machine.” Based on Strong Machine who once had a rampage in New Japan Pro-Wrestling, during the entrance, he was made into three people, highly acclaimed by pro-wrestling fans. We wish we could have seen him fight looking like this.

On the one hand, Tamura wasn't shaking his head no. One time, DSE president Nobuyuki Sakakibara brought him a birthday cake, celebrating his birthday while negotiating. Another time, staff went to Tamura's U-FILE CAMP from 5 a.m. to try to persuade him. However, it ended in failure. Early in the morning, as staff checked to see if Tamura's car was at the gym, he fled out the backdoor.

Perhaps Tamura needed time for himself to find a basis for the opportunity to fight Sakuraba. He didn't want to simply fight because the matchmaking was supposed to get people talking. That seemed to be the "trouble" of bullheaded Tamura concerning fighting Sakuraba.

If it was going to be like that, they would have to prepare alternate opponents for each of them. In the end, after names like Nogueira and Evander Holyfield were raised, Tamura's opponent was a settle-down to Ronnie Sefo.

Wait, let's talk about one more Sakuraba vs. Tamura plan. While their match was stuck on the reef, DSE decided on a possible final plan involving them in a tag-team match. A tag-team match, under MMA rules. Tag-team matches had happened before under grappling and MMA rules so it wasn't the most groundbreaking idea.

Not to mention, the stage would be New Year's Eve. Something so crazy was very much like PRIDE, and why not have some combination that is fitting of a matsuri⁷⁸. A tag-team match with Sakuraba and Tamura meeting would certainly have gotten people talking. It would be a dream for the fans. It would

⁷⁸ Japanese festival - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_festivals

also act as a prologue for a one-on-one fight. Sakuraba would pair with his otoutobun and Tamura with his disciple Kazuki Okubo as partners to fight in the tag-team match. Tamura went along with the plan. Maybe because a tag-team matches falls outside the scope of "trouble." However, both Sakuraba and Fuji TV said "no." Because "the concept of PRIDE is supposed to be one-on-one. If it's a tag-team match, it won't be PRIDE."

Like this, the tag-team idea was abandoned, a number of fights were put together, and candidates for Sakuraba were limited. Who was left were Antonio Rogerio Nogueira and major Lucha Libre veteran El Solar. Rogerio was somehow or other an abrupt difference in selection from El Solar.

Actually, El Solar's manager was also managing PRIDE's Giant Silva. His name came up when the manager was asked who he could bring. As well, El Solar had MMA experience in DEEP. He fought Minoru Suzuki, and because of his repeated bull's-eye attacks, inspired a Pancrase and Luchador fray. It had the stuff that made people talk, and El Solar seemed keen on the idea.

If they could make other fights with the feeling of a main event and give the night a matsuri feeling, then this match too would be fine as well. That was the feeling of the related people. But if Sakuraba vs. El Solar was in fact too "huh?" then maybe they could scrap a Sakuraba match. They started wondering if Sakuraba could fight in the way he appeared, as Saku-machine, in his entrance to the Royce Gracie fight.....

The possibility of an unprecedented Maskman MMA fight was entrusted to Sakuraba. Maybe Sakuraba would make the risky move to take on the

difficult match against Rogerio, or maybe he would make a “matsuri fight” against El Solar. Sakuraba chose the, in comparison, very risky Rogerio fight. The reason was exceedingly simple.

Sakuraba, until the end, always thinks and enforces his will as a fighter, so of course, he chose the dangerous Rogerio match. Sakuraba, called the man that brings the fun to Vale Tudo, perhaps that quality can be seen here.

Sakuraba lost by decision. There was a difference in size, and he suffered from Rogerio’s striking. It was a gruesome bout he lost in the end, not feeling like NYE. But he came to the ring in ultra gaudy and garish clothes like Sachiko Kobayashi and brought excitement to the fans, fulfilling his role. Shutting down tag-team matches and the debut of Maskman, no one can say they were wrong decisions.

File 017

Russia's secret weapon – the man that fell Fedor twice

The man who indulged in being named the "one in six billion, the strongest man in the world," Fedor Emelianenko, who beat many veterans and champions alike in PRIDE.

With that strength, which stood out even in PRIDE that gathered the best fighters in the world, he beat his rivals, Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira and Mirko Crocop, and no one appeared that seemed strong enough to challenge his champion spot.

However, there was a man that had beaten Fedor twice, and this natural enemy had been preparing to fight in PRIDE. The start of this was in 2003, when something happened that also hugely affected the world of MMA later on, Fedor's shocking move from Russian Top Team (RTT) to the Red Devil team.

The Red Devil MMA event M-1 was being put on and had connections with Bodog, M-1 Global, Affliction and American promotions. Fedor was also going into that ring. If Fedor had not moved to Red Devil, the global break that MMA received may not have happened.

It is said that the reason Fedor left RTT was related to money. According

to Fedor, “RTT president (Vladimir) Pogodin deceived us.” But Pogodin, more than a businessman, was more of an old-days gangster type, and the new generation of Russians including Fedor must have clashed with him mentally and emotionally.

In any case, Fedor started walking a new path. And to RTT, he was a complete and utter traitor. Fedor, who was a judoka and samboist leading an amateur fighting life came to be a pro through Volk Han [of RTT].

When he took the heavyweight championship from Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira, RTT leader Nikolai Zuev had been there involved in the planning of the strategy for the bout.



PHOTO – This is the man who crushed Fedor twice – Suren Balachinskiy. Just seeing his highly-trained and naturally strong body, he appears to be something special. If he had gathered more experience in MMA, he may have become a fighter above Fedor.

To RTT, it was like Fedor had just forgotten about his debt of gratitude. The RTT team members' anger was horrific. Han said, "Obliterate Fedor," making a declaration against him.

"Russians take care of Russians."

The front-runner candidate to take care of it was Sergei Kharitonov. Han and Zuev gave everything to Kharitonov. They instructed him with techniques that they had never shown to Fedor. Kharitonov was given the responsibility from RTT of KO'ing Fedor (and now, Kharitonov has also left RTT, training with Golden Glory).

But as the "Russian chosen to take care of a Russian," Kharitonov was not the only one. RTT had prepared one more assassin. That person you could say was Fedor's natural enemy.

That man's name is Suren Balachinskiy. A two-time world champion in sambo, he was the strongest of the strong. He started sambo at age 9 and joined a specialist sambo school (Sambo 70) at age 11. He had also beaten Russian judo champions and represented Russia in the Olympics strengthening the sambo team, a truly great career.

And Balachinskiy had one more part of his career that cannot be overlooked. He beat Fedor twice in sambo. Even after Fedor had started having a successful career, Balachinskiy was constantly extolled as an "outstanding talent surpassing Fedor."

It is said that Fedor, living in Stary Oskol, a small rural town, cried over

a decision loss at a judo event. Balachinskiy was a brilliant elite in the fight world. Of course, Fedor also was an accomplished judoka and samboist at the world level, but in the immediate environment, and looking at their match results, it was Balachinskiy that was the leader.

During the time when he was also in RTT, Balachinskiy must have been like the bright sun in Fedor's eyes.

Balachinskiy and Fedor were connected in one other way. The era of RINGS Russia. RINGS founder Akira Maeda went to Russia in search of new fighters and had tryouts. Both Fedor and pre-pro-debut Balachinskiy were there.

Maeda rated Balachinskiy the highest in terms of his fighting sense. Fedor was rated as, "with some polish, he might shine, a runner-up." This can also be seen in the difference in treatment they received in their Japanese pro debuts. Balachinskiy was given a fight in the main event of the RINGS KOK tournament. And as for "second man" Fedor, he was put in an event that was basically a gateway to success for novices, Battle Genesis (and the venue was the relatively small Kourakuen Hall).

Fedor's natural enemy had been steadily preparing to fight in PRIDE in 2004. He had lost to Valentijn Overeem in RINGS KOK, but this was due to a low kick to his knee, which had been an old injury. More than that, All-Russian Sambo Federation president Tikhomirov's knowledge of MMA was rather shallow, and he sent Balachinskiy to Japan basically without any MMA training.

To make his pro comeback, and to obliterate the traitor Fedor, a perfect

training environment was created for Balachinskiy. His sparring partner was Kharitonov. His coach was one of the original Russian frontrunners in Vale Tudo, Mikhail Illoukhine, and he was also under the direct instruction of Volk Han.

Balachinskiy had also made a confident comment, "I won't think about fighting in PRIDE until I am the strongest," and he was actually later put on the list to appear at PRIDE 28 in October of 2004. However, once again his old injuries got in the way and his appearance was cancelled. After that, he missed his chances to fight, and at some point, he just disappeared.

What if Balachinskiy had fought in PRIDE. And what if a fight between him and Fedor had been made, what would have happened. Comparing just MMA technique, Fedor probably would have won. It is said that from his youth, Fedor had almost an inferiority complex concerning Balachinskiy.

The fact that he had already lost to him twice. Feeling weak seeing him walk an elite course in his life. And in Balachinskiy's corner, he would have seen Volk Han.

Those elements might have snatched away the Last Emperor's cool. If that had happened..... Balachinskiy's participation in PRIDE was a huge "if."

File 018

Dream confrontations one after another happening outside the ring!? the Ryan Gracie Martial Story

PRIDE had put on so many dream matches in its ring, but on the other hand, the number of matches it had planned but didn't put on was not few. That is what this book is about. But there were also dream matches that happened outside the ring. The star of that show was the "family's crazy streetfighter" Ryan Gracie.

Ryan first fought on the mats of Japan at PRIDE 10 in 2000. He beat Tokimitsu Ishizawa from NJPW with a takedown followed by a stream of punches for the KO, making a huge impact. After that, things developed with him fighting Kazushi Sakuraba, Shungo Oyama and Ikuhisa Minowa. While also having the great fighting technique that the Gracie family was known for, his ferocious face and wild violent fights made him popular.

However, it was also clear that he was mentally erratic. He gained impressive victories in the Ishizawa and Oyama matches, but in the Sakuraba match, he used an injury as an excuse to ask to cut the fight time short and in the Ishizawa rematch, halfway through the fight he seemed cast away and was defeated.

And because of his personality, the way he was, he certainly didn't lack personal anecdotes, either. "I was shot with a pistol," "I stabbed someone with a knife," etc. In an accidental shooting, a bullet went through his leg causing a major injury.

In any case, for this man, street fighting was like breathing air. If the people he was with started a fight, too, the first person to jump in was Ryan. One year during Carnival in Rio on a blazing beach, Ryan's students started a tangle with Chute Boxe students. Of course, the students immediately called for Ryan. And of course, Ryan immediately ran to get there.

When he arrived, the guy he was going to fight was a huge heavyweight. And he was no beginner. He was an MMA fighter. Sensing what was what, Ryan quickly got a knife in his hand and thrust it into his flank..... Ever since then, Ryan and Chute Boxe had been at each other's throats.



PHOTO – The overly ferocious and out of control Ryan Gracie and older brother Renzo, the only person Ryan was nice to⁷⁹. Really, Renzo also was a bad seed when he was younger, feeling quite at home in being born bad. He must have been a big brother Ryan could rely on.

⁷⁹ juujun - obedient, gentle, meek, submissive, docile.

Chute Boxe was also of course a fighting group. Backstage, in the midst of fighters in a friendly atmosphere, the Chute Boxe guys just kept to themselves, never friendly with anyone else. They came to Japan to fight, and the others couldn't be seen as anything but rivals. That was Chute Boxe's professional sense.

The snow thaw between Ryan and Chute Boxe happened in Japan. They were both being booked by Booker K (Kouichi Kawasaki). And the person managing Ryan was the man he looked up to, Renzo Gracie.

Renzo, who may have liked fighting more than the young Ryan and who is at present a man of character, and Kawasaki stepped in, and a truce was called between Ryan and Chute Boxe. It is said that Ryan even crammed in to ride a taxi with Chute Boxe's Fedimar and Wanderlei Silva, sandwiching Kawasaki.

New Year's Eve 2003, just before the opening of Otoko-matsuri. Ryan asked something like this to Kawasaki:

"Kawasaki, what's up? Did those fuckers (Chute Boxe) say something about me?"

Kawasaki answered:

"No problem. They've come to Japan to do their job."

From there, Ryan went to Roppongi. It is said he drank until morning, returned to the hotel, and went to a restaurant on drunk legs, approached the Chute Boxe guys who were eating breakfast, and said this to Fedimar:

"That time, the fight on the beach..... I didn't know he was one of your guys. I fucked up."

Fedimar accepted the apology from Ryan. Fedimar is what we would call in Japan the big-brother type. Being face to face is the foundation to him, and meeting to talk is more important than anything. Ryan came of his own accord right up to him to apologize, so there was no reason not to accept it.

"Okay. From now on, it's water under the bridge," said Fedimar. Murilo Ninja and Mauricio Shogun who were there also said, "We're pros, and maybe if it's put together we will fight in the ring. But nothing personal," while shaking his hand.

And like that, the Ryan-Chute Boxe strife issue was settled. Their booker Kawasaki must have also had a hand in calming it all down. But as could be expected from Ryan, things didn't end here.

After shaking hands with the Chute Boxe guys and heading out, who happened to be there but some Brazilian Top Team (BTT) fighters. At this time, Ryan was in Japan to corner Daniel Gracie. Daniel was planned to face Wataru Sakata.

Actually, the first person offered to Sakata was Ryan. But due to a shoulder injury, Ryan refused, and basically, Daniel was offered as a replacement for him. Daniel was a real heavyweight fighter, but he forcibly dropped to 94 kg in preparation for the Sakata match.

And the coaches for Sakata since the RINGS era had been BTT. They

gave him a scoop on the matchmaking.

“Your opponent really was Ryan, but he turned it down, so you’re gonna fight Daniel, a heavyweight.”

The offer to Ryan was originally a secret, but Sakata ended up hearing about it which pissed Ryan off. Coming across BTT, they started talking to him, but Ryan wouldn’t respond. On the contrary, he glared. And he thrust Carlos Barreto away, who had been on bad terms with him from the past, and took off.

Refusing a fight and going out drinking all night is a thing in itself, but also immediately after clearing things up with Chute Boxe, to start a war with BTT takes the cake.

“I’d heard Ryan was one to watch out for, and that was for real. I was shocked,” said coach Fedimar who had seen the whole story develop.

Ryan, who left so many stories to tell, passed away in December 2007. His death was confirmed in the cell of a prison where he was taken into custody on the charge of car theft. Ryan was Ryan, but it ended sadly. He died at 33.

File 019

Was Wanderlei Silva KO'd in his locker room? The truth behind Krazy Horse vs. Chute Boxe

This book touches on the back stories of many of the plans that PRIDE made that became phantom fights. But there were also plans that PRIDE didn't have that came to be anyway, and one of those you would have to call a phantom as well.

Having to use that contradictory sentence to explain a fight, it must be Charles "Krazy Horse" Bennett vs. Cristiano Marcello. If you are a hardcore fan, you must know about it. The outbreak of a locker room fight backstage at PRIDE Otoko-matsuri 2005.

Cristiano is a jiu-jitsu practitioner known with the catchphrase "the grappling instructor to the strongest team." He originally learned GJJ under Royler and Rickson Gracie, and for a time, lived at Rickson's house training daily.

After that, he took up a role as the jiu-jitsu coach for Chute Boxe. It is said that for strikers like Wanderlei Silva and Mauricio Shogun, Cristiano's hand in training them to fight on the ground is primarily responsible for making them the great grapplers they have become. He participated in the August

2006 PRIDE Bushido 12 event, losing a decision to Mitsuhiro Ishida, but more than as an athlete, Chute Boxe relies heavily on him, and you can see his importance by the fact that he is brought along to Japan every time a Chute Boxe fighter has a fight scheduled.

On the other side was Bennett, just like his nickname, "Krazy," he is a crazy character that became a popular middleweight fighter. He made his debut in PRIDE with his 2004 fight against Takanori Gomi, showing people that win or lose he was going to put on an exciting fight.

Above all of Bennett's other fights, his most famous was against Ken Kaneko. The participation in a pro MMA bout by an actor created controversy, the bout sparking debate that swirled amongst the pros and cons. And at this event, the 2005 New Year's Eve Otoko-matsuri, an incident occurred in the locker room.

This Cristiano vs. Bennett fight was recorded in full by the TV staff's camera.



PHOTO – The end of 2005, an image of the training at the Chute Boxe Academy in Brazil. At the fore hitting the mitts is the actor Ken Kaneko, and in the ring is Sakuraba and Wanderlei hitting mitts as well. It's an unthinkable image now that makes it seem like a photoshop.

A bit later, the footage was made public, and the number of fans that have seen it is probably not few. After his fight against Kaneko, Bennett can be seen watching the event on a monitor.

Then, Cristiano said something, and whatever it was made Bennett stand up and head in a straight line to Cristiano. Cristiano was tackled, but as a black belt in BJJ, he immediately went for a triangle choke. Bennett being choked and throwing punches. But the choke got tighter and tighter, and finally, unconsciousness.....

What exactly caused such a thing to happen. One cause was the allotment of the locker room. Having Bennett and Chute Boxe in the same locker room was the first problem.

Of course, Bennett's opponent being Kaneko, one would think there'd be no problem putting him in the same locker room with Chute Boxe.

However, Kaneko had been training with Chute Boxe for his pro debut. It's a dojo where they don't care who you are, won't treat you like you're only a guest, and will put you through hard training. Sakuraba noted Kaneko's enthusiastic and tough training.

Even though he wasn't a Chute Boxe fighter, the Chute Boxe fighters treated him like one of them. Furthermore, Cristiano came to be in Kaneko's corner. What would happen then if you put Bennett and Chute Boxe in the same locker room..... It is said that there were some staff concerned about it.

"It's really no good putting Krazy Horse and Chute Boxe in the same

locker room.”

It seems this was said to the organizers’ side, but in the end, they went with them sharing the room. And then the incident happened.

Bennett, having beaten Kaneko, returned to the locker room in high and proud spirits. A more cheerful and crazy Bennett. In the locker room as well he didn’t hide his happiness, maybe not thinking about Kaneko having been treated like one of the Chute Boxe guys. If he had said, “it was a good fight” and they’d shook hands, nothing would have happened, but Bennett’s attitude was nothing like that.

Seeing his gloating must have disgusted the Chute Boxe members. Looking at it from Cristiano’s perspective, who had even cornered Kaneko, he must have been even feeling even more bothered by it. Cristiano started talking, loud enough for Bennett also to hear.

“Hey, maybe I’ll be the next one to go with him.”

These words ruffled Bennett. Bennett, who had previously been in street gangs. If someone was looking for trouble, he couldn’t just sit silent. “If you want it, why don’t we do it here.”

And Bennett grabbed at Cristiano, and Cristiano fell back to a triangle. Of course, there were a bunch of fighters and related people there. But no one tried to stop it. Booker K who happened to be there said:

“No one tried to stop the fight. Even Fedima (Chute Boxe coach Fedimar) wouldn’t stop it. In that instant, it felt like that locker room became Brazil.”

In Brazil, a fight between two men is a duel. If someone were to interfere, it would make things worse. Let the two that have a problem settle it together. Don't let anyone else into it. That's the Brazilian style. So, none of the surrounding Chute Boxe fighters tried to stop the fight, they didn't make it any worse, they simply watched attentively.

Unconscious, spread-eagle on the floor, Bennett finally comes around. Well, his eyes were blank and he seemed unable to get a grasp on things. And when he stood up, for some reason he went after Wanderlei Silva punching.

Hitting Silva before his match of course couldn't be forgiven. This time, the Chute Boxe guys rushed in to break it up. Wanderlei, thinking the issue had been settled, was caught off guard and ate some of Bennett's punches. And wearing the damage from those punches, he went in to win his rematch against Ricardo Arona.

File 020

What's with "that" Yuji Nagata challenging both Mirko Crocop and Nobuhiko Takada

Lining up "Gracie," "Brazil," "U-Inter," etc., looking back at PRIDE's history, there's another keyword that cannot be left out – "New Japan Pro Wrestling." When Antonio Inoki held the title of executive producer and Kazuyuki Fujita and Tokimitsu Ishizawa (Kendo Kashin) were fighting, PRIDE had a deep connection with NJPW.

From 2003, the REBORN PRIDE wasn't so weighted with NJPW or pro-wrestling in general, but there were plans in connection with NJPW. The biggest was Yuji Nagata in Otoko-matsuri 2003.

In May 2003, NJPW held an event at the Tokyo Dome, "Ultimate Crush" with MMA matchmaking. Fumihiko Inoue, producer (then), was made the flag carrier and they started walking in big steps in the direction of MMA.

PRIDE also started negotiations with Japanese fighters for its heavyweight GP to be held the next year. And there was a plan for the PRIDE Bushido in October of the same year to use NJPW fighters. The start of Bushido was to be "Japan vs. Gracie" with five fights under that banner, then came the idea of PRIDE vs. NJPW and NJPW vs. Gracie.

However, the subject of this section, Nagata, had no relation with these moves. His challenge in MMA in a bout against Mirko Crocop happened in the Inoki-matsuri ring, and he had not appeared in PRIDE. He was an IWGP heavyweight champion and old guard in pro-wrestling. He embodied the appeal of pro-wrestling.

His move towards competing in PRIDE came from PRIDE Bushido 1.



PHOTO – August 2002, the first K-1 vs. Inoki army battle, Mirko who TKO'd Kazuyuki Fujita. His second MMA fight was against Nobuhiko Takada. Before this match as well, Takada was saying, "Why won't any pro-wrestlers step up?" foreshadowing Yuji Nagata's match against Mirko.

The drawcard for this event among the line-up was Mirko. But his opponent just couldn't be decided. At that point, DSE made a public appeal to discover someone as a final measure.

And in asking the public, one name that was raised was Masayuki Kouno. Kouno was an NJPW novice wrestler. He had a huge body and there were great expectations for him in the future, but he had almost no name value. Further, this instance was actually an independent play by Kouno.

They were making the necessary arrangements, without even getting the okay from All-Japan Pro-Wrestling's president Keiji Mutoh, but in the end it was not to be (later, Kouno went on to compete in Pancrase, etc., becoming a true MMA fighter).

In the end, Mirko's opponent was decided, a Lucha Libre wrestler who was competing in DEEP, Dos Caras, Jr. Really, this match had been on the drawing board inside PRIDE from before the public appeal. That said, to announce this match normally would have people shouting "mismatch." This is one of the reasons that they made the public appeal. As well, chief Takada used it to provoke NJPW.

"Why the hell won't any NJPW wrestler step up to fight Mirko?"

Mirko had beaten Kazuyuki Fujita and Kazushi Sakuraba, holding the nickname at the time, "Pro-wrestler Hunter." So to see Mirko defeated, with NJPW being the biggest and longest standing organization, why wouldn't they

send anyone?

The person to answer this provocation was Nagata. It isn't too hard to imagine that he was disgusted with MMA and PRIDE. MMA became big by having the Gracies defeat pro-wrestlers.

PRIDE was at its peak. There were no fears. This contrasted with the genre of pro-wrestling having declined in force⁸⁰. In the midst of this, it would seem natural to just call out names from other organizations, criticizing and saying, "Why won't you fight?" You could say they "used" Nagata.

From reporters as well, Nagata was asked, "Wouldn't you like to rematch Mirko?" In the midst of this, Nagata confided a certain determination to Director Uei.

"If they go so far as to say that, I can't just sit silent. I'm going to fight Mirko on New Year's Eve. But I'm going to need to use the two months before the bout to really get prepared, so could you let me have time off? Of course, during that time I won't need any of my fees."

And Nagata was thinking ahead.

"In exchange for me fighting against Mirko on New Year's Eve, I want to bring Takada into the (NJPW) January 4 Tokyo Dome event."

At the same time, PRIDE and Antonio Inoki had split. Riding the unprecedented boom in MMA, Inoki joined up with Nippon TV, moving to put on Inoki-matsuri. From here, it would be a complete split. That is to say, Nagata's

⁸⁰ ikioi - force, vigor, vigour, energy, spirit, life, authority, influence, power, might, impetus.

PRIDE appearance and Takada's NJPW appearance were extinguished.

From there, New Japan Pro Wrestling deepened its connections with K-1, dispatching fighters to ROMANEX. That was connected with Uei's role as producer for HERO'S. Connections to PRIDE were severed.

And for Nagata, there were no more connections between PRIDE and Inoki, so his NYE appearance was cancelled, and his thoughts of returning to challenge MMA disappeared for the time being. His anger at being directly called out by Takada and PRIDE surely may have seen him returning to fight against Mirko.

Perhaps he was simply thinking to fight as one of the main currents of pro-wrestling and give pro-wrestling anew a well-needed push. But, in the midst of the trouble with Inoki-matsuri, he was pushed again, and ended up returning to MMA once more in Kobe to be destroyed by Fedor Emelianenko in 2003.

PRIDE Fighters' Unknown Stories 4

Ryo Chonan

"Getting to fight the best in the world in PRIDE, getting to meet Dan Henderson was big for me."

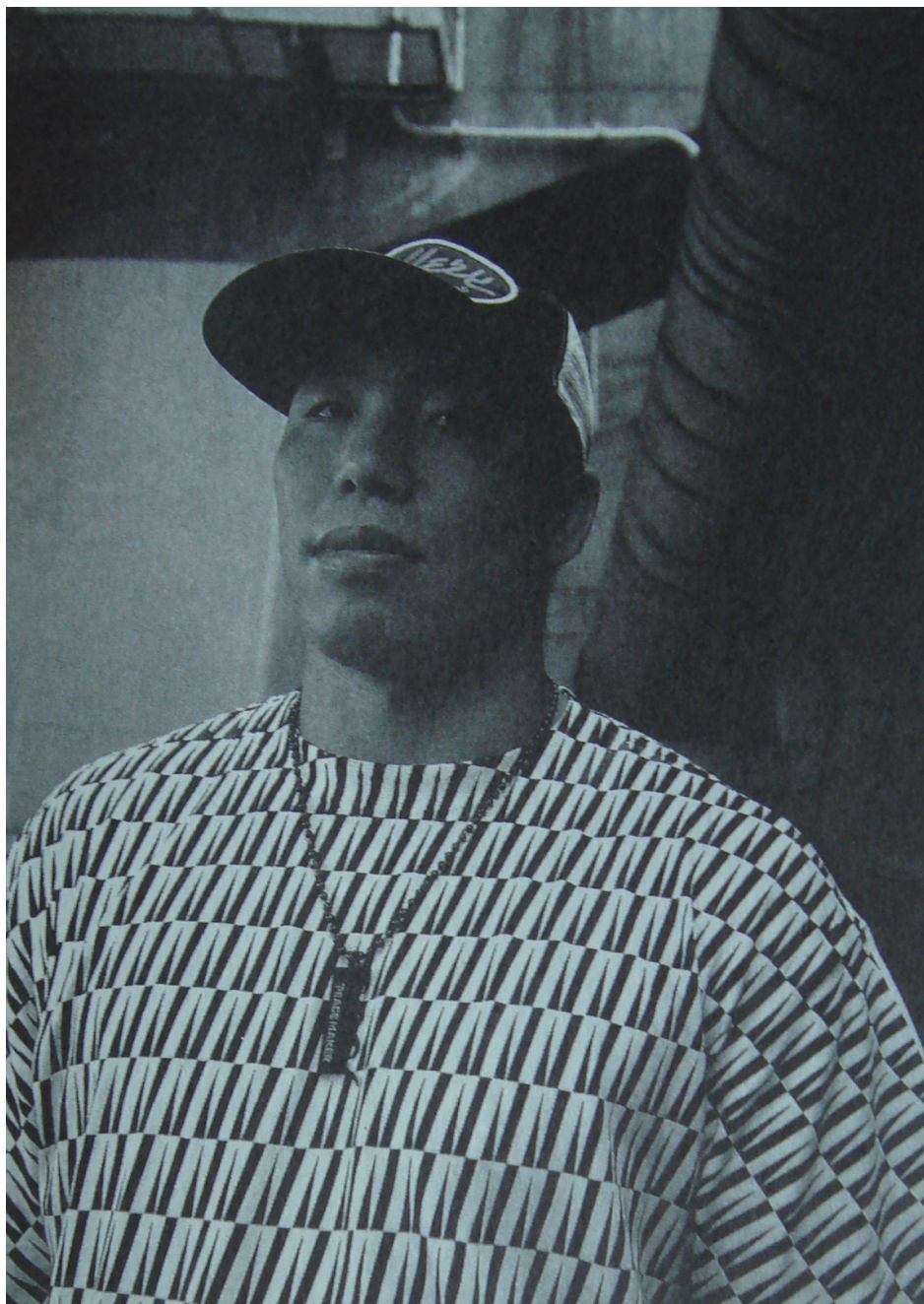


PHOTO – Ryou Chounan. Born October 8, 1976, Yamagata prefecture. Started MMA in Kiyoshi Tamura's U-FILE CAMP, making his pro debut in 2001 in DEEP. Distinguished himself in September 2003 beating legend Hayato "Mach" Sakurai. Competed in PRIDE in the welterweight -83kg class, and also defeated present UFC champion Anderson Silva. Now active in the UFC. 175cm, 77kg.

Interviewer: You got your first victory in the UFC (September 6, 2008, UFC 88, he won by split decision over Roan “Jucao” Carneiro) and were going to triumphantly return home to Japan, or so it was thought, but you ended up staying there another month training, didn’t you (this interview was recorded in September).

Chonan: I had originally bought a roundtrip ticket for polishing up my game without having a match lined up, so I thought I should use the time there well as I had originally planned.

Interviewer: In an earlier interview, when asked about living and working away from your family⁸¹, you had said, “My wife’s okay, but letting my daughter forget me is horrible.” (laughing)

Chonan: With my wife, there was an understanding between us, but for my daughter, for her father to go off to America before her first birthday, she can’t understand (laughing).

Interviewer: That’s a worry (laughing). So, I’d like to ask you some questions focusing on PRIDE, so, to begin with, did you see PRIDE 1 live?

⁸¹ Tanshinfunin – a somewhat common practice in Japan where a husband and wife live separately, sometimes permanently, because the husband’s work requires him to move somewhere that the wife doesn’t want to move to (because the children have already started school or because she would be moving away from her family, etc.)

Chonan: I saw a recording or something of it at my company dormitory. I was working as a carpenter at the time, and there were a lot of pro-wrestling and MMA fans in the same dorm, so from their influence.

Interviewer: By the way, how did you see Nobuhiko Takada vs. Rickson Gracie?

Chonan: It really shattered some illusions. But at the same time it was like, "Well, if it had been Akira Maeda, he would've won," I thought the same thing "those" fans did (laughing).

Interviewer: The genuine fun of being an MMA fan, right.

Chonan: Nah, actually at first I thought that MMA was completely boring (laughing). But, I kind of accepted it because they were real fights. I told myself, "so this is what a real win-or-lose fight⁸² is."

Interviewer: I see. What was your reason for first starting in MMA?

Chonan: During the time when I was a carpenter, there was a bit where every single day was just a repeat of the previous one and it put a real squeeze on me mentally. If all you're doing is working, there's no difference between Yamagata and Tokyo, so I thought about returning to my family home, and thought before that I should do some things that you can only do in Tokyo, so

⁸² shinkenshoubu – fighting with real swords.

I joined U-FILE. At the time I wasn't thinking that I'd be able to become a pro, I just did it to create some memories of my time there.

Interviewer: Why did you choose U-FILE CAMP?

Chonan: I originally really liked RINGS, and I heard those ace fighters would personally be instructing me, and it fit with where I was working as well. The problem was I didn't have the money for the initiation fee or for the monthly fee, so I borrowed 100,000 yen [roughly \$1,000 USD] from my company and joined around New Year's of 2000.

Interviewer: That showed resolution, didn't it. So what was it like when you actually entered?

Chonan: The training was nothing but fun. To sweat like that along with university students and other workers, when I compared it to my daily life up until then, it was completely stimulating. And about three months after I started training there, I could get the best of just about everyone below (Ryuuki) Ueyama.

Interviewer: MMA really fit you. You made your pro debut in 2001 in DEEP while working as a carpenter, wasn't that difficult, doing that while also working?

Chonan: It was hard. It was the dark ages (laughing). I'd go out for work at 6 a.m. and when work was finished, I would go to train at the gym in the evening. I would return home to sleep past midnight. And I would have to take off work to prepare whenever I had a match. Trying to keep both going, I just kept borrowing money.

Interviewer: That's a matter of life and death, isn't it.

Chonan: Well, now I can laugh about it (laughing). And the money I received from fighting was not much. It was really rough, but on the plus side, it disciplined me mentally⁸³.

Interviewer: Getting through those rough times, you had good results in DEEP and made a new start moving to PRIDE Bushido, right.

Chonan: Yeah, as I had beaten Hayato "Mach" Sakurai, Saeki (Shigeru, head of DEEP) and others around me were really rooting for and pushing me.

Interviewer: What were the good things about moving up to Bushido?

Chonan: Getting to fight the best in the world was the biggest thing. Starting with Anderson (Silva), (Carlos) Newton and Ricardo (Almeida). Facing Dan (Henderson) who's been a part of everything since the beginning was big.

⁸³ kitaeru - to forge, to drill, to temper, to train, to discipline.

Interviewer: It was a crossroads in your MMA life, right. Maybe a rude question but did joining PRIDE also give a sudden rise in your fight money?

Chonan: Nah, well, to be honest I think probably HERO'S was the highest.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

Chonan: I heard stuff like, "Why is this guy getting so much?" (laughing).

Now, I can say it, but when I joined PRIDE, in the beginning, the money wasn't any different from DEEP.

Interviewer: Whoa?! So it was like, it slowly increased from after that?

Chonan: Yeah, and I started getting bonuses. For the fighters that were getting good guarantee money for PRIDE it was good, but for someone like me that was working his way up, the money wasn't that high.

Interviewer: By the way, did you still continue as a carpenter for awhile after you joined PRIDE?

Chonan: I did up until the Carlos Newton fight (October 14, 2004).

Interviewer: What was it that made you want to solely pursue MMA?

Chonan: Simply, "I can make a living," "I should get higher level training."
But I didn't send my company a letter of resignation. Even if I get busy with

training, I still show up around work when I can. I didn't formally quit (laughing).

Interviewer: So you could always just return to the job (laughing). So, in PRIDE, you didn't have multiple-match contracts, only single-fight, why was that?

Chonan: I felt that also fighting in DEEP was important. I had an obligation to Saeki. As well, at first, the PRIDE money was low. For example, even if I went on and won against a big name guy, the low money would already be written into the multi-fight contract and there'd be no room for negotiation. I didn't want that.

Interviewer: So you decided based on a lot of thought. During the time you were active in PRIDE Bushido, they still had the TV broadcasting, so did that have any effect on you?

Chonan: The TV programme SRS (Fuji TV) really gave me a push and made me appear interesting, and because of that, if like I went to the convenience store, people would be like, "It's Chonan!"

Interviewer: You became known.

Chonan: If I had to say one way or the other, for me, it was a pain in the ass (laughing). To get called by name like that at a fight venue is cool, though. But on the street.....



PHOTO – 2004 NYE PRIDE Otoko-matsuri, Chonan vs. Anderson Silva. Silva was favored to win the fight standing, but Chonan used kani-basami to a heel hold in the final round in a turnaround victory. Presently the UFC middleweight champion, he suffered a total loss – this footage was used by the UFC before Chonan's matches.

Interviewer: There are a lot of fighters that are happy to become famous and have people come up to talk to them.

Chonan: But I look at someone like (Hidehiko) Yoshida and think, "that's tough." Your privacy. For that, the US is better. There, at a sports gym, someone will say, "hey, you fought, didn't you," or come to me really positively like, "when are you fighting next?" If you compare that, Japan is really bad, like sneaking peeks at me from the shadows. Or drinking in Shinjuku, drunks will come up to me and take my photo without asking. Japan is..... it doesn't have freshness⁸⁴ (laughing).

Interviewer: Dahahaha! It's the national character⁸⁵ (laughing). PRIDE was also known for their promotion intro videos, and from that, you got the nickname "Piranha."

Chonan: At first, I kind of resisted it, but now, it's a nickname that's easy to remember for anyone in the world, so I think it's good.

Interviewer: You came around to it, didn't you.

Chonan: Heh, the people that gave me the name were Sasahara (Keiichi, PRIDE publicity staff) and my wife (laughing)!

⁸⁴ sawayaka – brisk/freshness/invigoration, a sort of newness or cheerful energy, etc.

⁸⁵ kishitsu - spirit, character, trait, temperament, disposition.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

Chonan: They gave it to me with the idea of the underdog winning⁸⁶. They said then there was still room to change it if I ended up not liking it. So right there on the spot I said, "I don't like it so please change it" (laughing).

Interviewer: You wanted to change (laughing).

Chonan: But like on TV or something, "piranha" is an interesting name, so just like that it was attached to me, written in big fancy letters.

Interviewer: Well, so in the end, you could say it was a good thing, right (laughing). On the other hand, what was bad about PRIDE?

Chonan: Hmmm, well talking about the rules, "Action!" pissed me off (laughing).

Interviewer: The ref's voice when a match was stalled.

Chonan: And the yellow cards. It didn't make sense to me, like, is it that the fight is no good, or is it that they want it to just be more exciting for the fans. It really wouldn't have an effect if the fight went to the judges. But I understand the urge to break a fight out of a spot where it's stalled, there are just some fighters whose styles don't match well with each other.

⁸⁶ oomonogui – eating something bigger than you, defeating a superior opponent.

Interviewer: To a fighter, sometimes the stalling is important in the fight, there's a meaning.

Chonan: If the referee understands the flow of the fight, that's good, but I feel like it was mostly that the referee didn't know why the fight was stalemated. For me, I prefer the refereeing in the US. They just let you do your thing, further than you'd expect. In PRIDE, there were also fights that were stopped at the wrong time.

Interviewer: A number of fights come to mind.

Chonan: And there were also fights like, "hey, why aren't you stopping this?" It was at extremes. Well, but, it's not that I don't like the people refereeing. But hearing them go on and on with their explanations at the weigh-ins and rules meetings the day before a fight was a pain in the ass. I also hated that kind of thing in school (laughing).

Interviewer: I can somehow picture that (laughing). Were there any other points you thought they should have improved on?

Chonan: They should have run much tighter doping tests for the foreign fighters.

Interviewer: It was really evident from their build in some cases. Now, you are 76 kg, but during PRIDE Bushido, you also fought some 83 kg matches.

Chonan: If I think about it now, it's like, "idiot" (laughing). We did a lot to make MMA exciting back then. But that turned out in the end to hurt us.

Interviewer: The lack of something like an athletic commission in Japan was a problem, right. Do you feel that the management of the fighters is another big difference between the US and Japan?

Chonan: That's because the relationships between the commission and the promoters are a completely different thing, they're separated. Japan should also handle the fighter situation more objectively.

Interviewer: So, the US management system is the ideal.

Chonan: For me, it's fine, but like, if one of my younger guys were going to fight in a big event, I'd want them protected with much more strict handling.

Interviewer: So in that way, what organization in Japan reaches closest to the ideal?

Chonan: It would have to be Shooto that's best prepared, wouldn't it. The organization and the promoters are separate. Looking at the referees too, they really amazingly understand the difference between batting and hitting.

Interviewer: There's the idea that PRIDE was, in the main, about the events, while Shooto is about bringing up the fighters.

Chonan: But Shooto can't hold on to the fighters it raises up. I don't really know why, but anyway, a fighter can't get great unless they have a guaranteed income that supports their training environment and so on. Thinking that, from a bunch of different things, the UFC is the best fit for me.

Interviewer: The most ideal environment is the one you're in now. If I say your turning point in PRIDE, what would you say that was?

Chonan: Hmmmm (deep thought).

Interviewer: How about your win against Anderson who's now the UFC middleweight champ? (December 31, 2004)

Chonan: Nah, at that time I didn't really think anything. Opposite, like, "this is a big deal?"

Interviewer: As for you going to the UFC, didn't you receive some reputation from that fight?

Chonan: No, there wasn't a feeling like they were lifting me up. I mean, even on the event poster for my UFC debut, I was the only one on the main card that didn't have his photo on the thing (laughing)!

Interviewer: That kind of humiliation (laughing). So, what fight personally left an impression on you?

Chonan: The fight against Joey Villaseñor.

Interviewer: At the start of the PRIDE welterweight GP, right (June 4, 2006).

Chonan: It isn't so highly praised in Japan, but for me, it's that fight. And a lot of fans in the US told me it was a good fight. So yeah it must be the Joey fight, the US fans like it, it was a happy victory, and I think it is connected with where I am now. Before that fight, I had lost two in a row in PRIDE, so it was a win that came when I was down. I also got injured (depressed fracture of the cheekbone) in the fight, but even including the time leading up to the fight, it sticks with me.

Interviewer: What did you think when it was announced that Fuji was cutting the broadcast?

Chonan: I didn't really think anything. Though I did feel like, "I wonder if this is going to turn out to be big." Honestly, I didn't think what happened with TV had anything to do with me.

Interviewer: So no change.

Chonan: There wasn't a dimension to it like, what's going to happen to the fighters. Not even like, "well, if I put on a good fight it'll be alright." It was just like oh well.

Interviewer: After that it was sold to the UFC owners, did you worry then, "What's going to happen to PRIDE?"

Chonan: Well, Dana came along, and I thought, “finally, I’ll fight inside the cage,” and I was a little happy.

Interviewer: You’re so positive (laughing). There is talk about behind the scenes with that press conference (March 26, 2007), Dana said in front of a bunch of fighters, “Do you want to fight in the UFC?” and with all the other fighters refraining from saying anything, only you raised your hand (laughing).

Chonan: Secretly, I thought, “this is a good swing of things” (laughing). I felt I’d reached the limit at 83 kg as well.

Interviewer: You thought, “My place for fighting doesn’t have to be PRIDE”?

Chonan: My feeling is like, if the ring for my fights goes away, I should look for another one. If it doesn’t stop my path as a fighter, I shouldn’t worry about it.

Interviewer: There were a lot of fighters waiting with the hope of PRIDE restarting.

Chonan: At that time, I felt that the number one fighters for me to face were all in the UFC. So I didn’t understand waiting for it to restart.

Interviewer: You finally went to the UFC on the strength of the fighters. But, of course, you also must have warm memories of PRIDE, right?



PHOTO – September 2003, a DEEP event in Ota-ku, Chonan fighting Hayato “Mach” Sakurai lands a punch to Sakurai’s eye area causing an injury that results in a doctor stoppage win over a truly great champion. Because of this, Mach, regarded as a top fighter, had to excuse himself from PRIDE Bushido

1. Chonan’s win, out of the blue, had reverberations in Bushido.

Chonan: Yeah, but when the “world summit ring” moved to a different place, I simply thought that I wanted to challenge myself over there. As a competitor, and also that I’m not young, I had no time to wait.

Interviewer: I see. You put a lot of thought into the decision.

Chonan: The idea of challenging myself at my optimal weight also had appeal. I decided that with Saeki who, from my debut, had always looked out for me in that regard as my manager.

Interviewer: From PRIDE to Yarennoka!, HERO’S to DREAM, new stages were formed.

Chonan: As Mayhem’s (Jason Miller) corner or just in the audience I’m able to see the events and simply enjoy them.

Interviewer: Can you sense PRIDE in it?

Chonan: No, I sense that it is a “new place.” Strictly speaking, I think “besides the lightweight and middleweight tournaments, what’s going on?”

Interviewer: Listening to you speak, it really seems you have gone one-way in terms of going away from Japan to the UFC.

Chonan: I feel the same way for DREAM and Sengoku. I’m happy that they are keeping the fans excited with MMA in my home country.

Interviewer: For you, would it be DEEP that you consider your memory-filled home ring?

Chonan: Yeah, the place that raised me up. Working from the bottom in DEEP, that extra time I was working to build myself up is I think what made PRIDE happen for me. So while I was fighting in PRIDE, I was also occasionally still fighting in DEEP. But saying that, what I accomplished in my life in PRIDE has serious weight. Because of PRIDE, I could start to make a living in MMA, and because of PRIDE, I was able to get into the UFC. As well, meeting my wife was thanks to PRIDE.

Interviewer: So in the end, the most major thing in PRIDE was meeting your wife, who was a member of DSE's PR team? (laughing)

Chonan: Hmmm, well yeah, thinking about my life, that probably is so, but thinking about MMA, it was fighting Dan, but those two aspects are different. You can't compare them with each other..... but I'm really in trouble here being asked if meeting my wife was the biggest thing about PRIDE (laughing).

Interviewer: Your child was born and you are supporting your family, so has your mindset changed at all?

Chonan: I'm not overwhelmed with feelings of guilt about what I do or anything, and I'm in tight with her family too, I would just like for them to let me concentrate on training like they have been doing.

Interviewer: Is it okay, saying things like that (laughing)?

Chonan: Well, I'm in a blessed environment where I have the understanding of my family as an MMA fighter..... But, I tend to worry about what'll happen like if I lose my next match and such (laughing).

Interviewer: I see (laughing). We're hoping for you to continue competing in the "world summit ring!"

Chapter Five

“The era of the light-middleweight category created by ‘PRIDE Bushido’”

2003, meeting its peak, PRIDE started a new brand outside its number series, PRIDE Bushido.

Giving a chance to Japanese lighter-weight fighters, creating competition between teams, putting on experimental matchmaking that couldn't happen in PRIDE's numbered events, it was an event like an MMA "toy chest."

At the time when Bushido started, it was compared unfavorably with the main PRIDE events, and the event concept couldn't be concretized, leading it close to an early death a number of times. But from Bushido 7, it went through a renewal as an event focused on the lighter weights, wrangling top fighter Takanori Gomi, and could start to wear the PRIDE name without a sense of embarrassment.

In the weight classes above middleweight, Japanese fighters seemed unable to win, so Bushido produced top class fighters one after another in the lower weight divisions. Japanese MMA welcomed its lighter-weight era, and this continued on with DREAM and Sengoku.

That said, as the "MMA toy chest," there were from the start a lot of far too experimental and unthinkable plans for Bushido. In this chapter, we look at Bushido's birth pains and pick out a number of its experiments.

File 021

The battle for survival - PRIDE Bushido was the PRIDE survivor!

To say "PRIDE Bushido" is to most likely conjure the image of an established event that was the major stage that boosted the lighter-weight fighters. But in its inauguration, the original concept, and as well, the original aim, were completely different.

At the June 2003 PRIDE 26 event, after having been REBORN, PRIDE launched a series of new strategies in rapid succession. The August middleweight GP received huge acclaim, setting off PRIDE as the "place to determine the strongest man." And right on its heels, starting in October, the new brand "PRIDE Bushido" was launched.

Putting on events at the level of PRIDE intermixed with PRIDE's main events worked to increase the number of athletes under contract with the organization. It wasn't a problem of securing just the guys at the top. The middle-rank fighters, the novices they were hoping to bring up, the guys they

thought they would just try to use for something..... and further, the guys who hadn't lived up to expectations in their performances, the guys who lost their touch and were starting to lose frequently, all of them.

With that happening, their fighter list had to include fighters whose contracts just couldn't be cancelled and fighters that they had no idea how to use. As well, there were also fighters that had good future potential but that couldn't be used as present. PRIDE in 2003 put on five major events including the New Year's Eve Otoko-matsuri, but it was clear that there was an insufficiency in the amount of places in which fighters could fight. So it was that a sub-event was planned.

In 2002 with MMA THE BEST, it seems like they had already formed such a thing, but it ended after just three events, two at Kourakuen Hall, and one at Differ Ariake. Further, if they were going to do something that would include the PRIDE name, they would have to increase the scale. There, the plan they came up with was a concept titled, "PRIDE Survivor."

Fighters that had fallen back from the forefront would be pitted against each other, fighting for their survival..... if those types of fights were put on, it surely would have been thrilling for the fans. Particularly, fights between guys that had fallen from "Division 1" would have blazed bright white. With this idea, "PRIDE Survivor" was the number one candidate as the name of PRIDE's new event.

But there was a big problem with this concept.

“What will happen to the fighters that lose?”

Something like this: If they win in this “battle royale,” they can stay. If they win powerfully, they can come back into the main PRIDE fold. But if they lose, they would just have to be dropped. If fighters keep getting dropped, there will be no one left to fight in the event.

However, there were many fighters that were there in order for PRIDE to handle the number of contracted fights, but it wasn’t like they could just say, “Hi, bye⁸⁷.” So for that reason, PRIDE Survivor was rejected. It was a concept that really took into account the facts of the time, and it also had a good name, but perhaps, in reverse, it was looking too much at the facts of the time. By the way, at this time, a number of naming ideas had been proposed. Among them, it seems there was one called, “PRIDE Tokyo Outsiders.” What sort of ruffians would have been put into that!?

To be frank, to start with, PRIDE Bushido was to be an event made up of lower class fighters. But there was no way they could promote it like that to the fans. Among the ideas, the staff used their wisdom to come up with the concept, “experimental place.” The idea was that it would be a place existing so

⁸⁷ This is based on the Japanese idea that business should be conducted in a “wet” (irrational, emotional, subjective, etc.) fashion as opposed to the Western “dry” approach (cold, rational, logical, objective). In other words, the ties you make to a person might trump the bottom line.

that the PRIDE fighters could continue to fight, and things that you couldn't try in the PRIDE core could be tried there.

In those extra innings, they also added the aim of, "bringing up Japanese fighters that can succeed at the world level." If it were just a place for bringing up fighters, it would be just the same as K-1 Japan, but it differed by having an experimental element.

As an aside, DSE president Sakakibara had made examples for what PRIDE Bushido would be by citing, "Armani and Emporio Armani," and "WWE Smackdown and Raw." "There's a casual line and a normal line, but Emporio also sells suits. There is no saying which one is above and which one is below."

With the concept becoming certain, the name settled down to "PRIDE Bushido." Not only would the word "Bushido" be easy to remember as a place for Japanese fighters, it was also connected with the name given to international developments that Nobuhiko Takada was spearheading with UWF International. It really was most suitable.

At this time, there was a plan for Mirko Crocop, who had been fighting one battle after another as if his life depended on it, to compete in Bushido from the start to give it the appearance of a "new PRIDE event." But from there, the matchmaking puzzle couldn't be solved.

First, as a Bushido candidate, veteran ace Hayato “Mach” Sakurai fought in DEEP one month previous, losing to Ryo Chonan. His appearance would have to be cancelled.

Next, Mirko Crocop’s opponent just couldn’t be decided. Even calling it a sub-event, if Mirko’s opponent was completely uninteresting, they weren’t sure they could make a card worth something. They made another step, calling out to the public for who Mirko would fight, but the only person whose name was raised was NJPW rookie Masayuki Kouno (and further, his name had been put on the list without asking permission from the company).



PHOTO – PRIDE Bushido, started in October 2003. In expectation, Inoki and “Bushido fighters” entered the ring at the Saitama PRIDE GP 2003 opening round event in August of the same year. But it received the sudden blow of a “no” from Sakakibara.

And no matter how much Mirko was called "pro-wrestler hunter," Kouno's status was far too away from his. In the midst of all this, listed up in the end was just Dos Caras, Jr., who had been competing in DEEP.

This was something that showed the luster of "an experiment that could not have been done in the main PRIDE events," and it added in the new concept in the style of DEEP of an MMA toy chest. To have the unprecedented "Mirko vs. a masked Mexican pro-wrestler" in their first event would help to generate talk, as well as to help differentiate it from the main PRIDE events, surely the results would be fine.

Somewhat randomly and unplanned like this, Bushido attained its beginning, with no idea that it would close in on the top of competition with the likes of Sergei Kharitonov and Fedor's brother Alexander making their debuts.

As well, Kharitonov's entry was in a Bushido challenge match. In other words, not a main Bushido bout, but rather, a "future fight," what they called matches between newcomers. If Fedor's brother Alexander, as well, alongside, Kharitonov who was simply a no-name Russian fighter at the time, hadn't gotten the chance through PRIDE Bushido, he would have never appeared in PRIDE. Looking at it this way, the meaning of Bushido getting its start was far from insignificant.

But to talk about this first event, the style of having Japanese fighters against the Gracies was received exceedingly poorly, and so we would have to wait until the second event for the "Japanese fighters - lighter weight classes"

theme and Takanori Gomi's breakout into a series of consecutive wins. While it can be said that PRIDE had amply gathered knowhow, it now had also grown stronger from the birth pains of launching a new event.

File 022

Mil Máscaras interferes in the main event of PRIDE Bushido

The match built for the main event of PRIDE Bushido 1 was Mirko Crocop vs. Dos Caras, Jr.

For the first time in history, a masked wrestler would be making his appearance in the PRIDE ring, fighting against “the” Mirko, a bout seemingly made in another dimension. There were lots of twists and turns and complications up to the point of making it happen, the biggest problem being Dos Caras, Jr.’s uncle, a leading figure of the Mexican pro-wrestling world, Mil Máscaras. What happened in this famous Lucha Libre family?

As was hit upon earlier, this was the launch of Bushido, its first event. The appearance of Mirko had been planned from the start, but his opponent just couldn’t be decided. Finally, going through media, they appealed to the fans with a set of names, and that is how Dos Jr. came to be picked. It was a match that was unthinkable in the core PRIDE brand, so it was put together as the first main event for Bushido.

But it isn't just that Dos Jr. was chosen as a curiosity. Not only was he approaching two meters in height [6 feet, 5 inches], he showed amazing ability in wrestling as an Olympic representative, having achieved fame in DEEP as well.

At DEEP's second event, on August 2001 at Yokohama Arena, after their inception, the theme was "Luchadors (Mexican pro-wrestlers) in MMA." To mention Lucha is to mention high flying mid-air winning techniques – the element of "show" in Mexican pro-wrestling is very strong.

To fuse it with seemingly its antithesis, MMA, people were thinking, "Well, it's interesting, but they're not going to win." Even among pro-wrestling fans, they looked at it with a feeling of, "I can't say I'm wishing for it to happen, but if we could see a Sky-high pulled off in MMA that would be an amazing sight, and I've heard his father Dos Caras will come with him to corner him, so I would at least watch it."

However, Dos Jr. had pulled off a beautiful belly-to-belly suplex throwing Pancrase's heavyweight hope Kengo, dislocating Kengo's elbow for an amazing victory less than a minute into the match! Not just the fans who had come to the arena, everyone in the MMA world was shocked. Further, in his post-fight interview, he made comments like, "That's a throw that's banned in Lucha, a 'chirima'" shattering illusions! With just this one fight, Dos Jr. became a major fighter to watch.

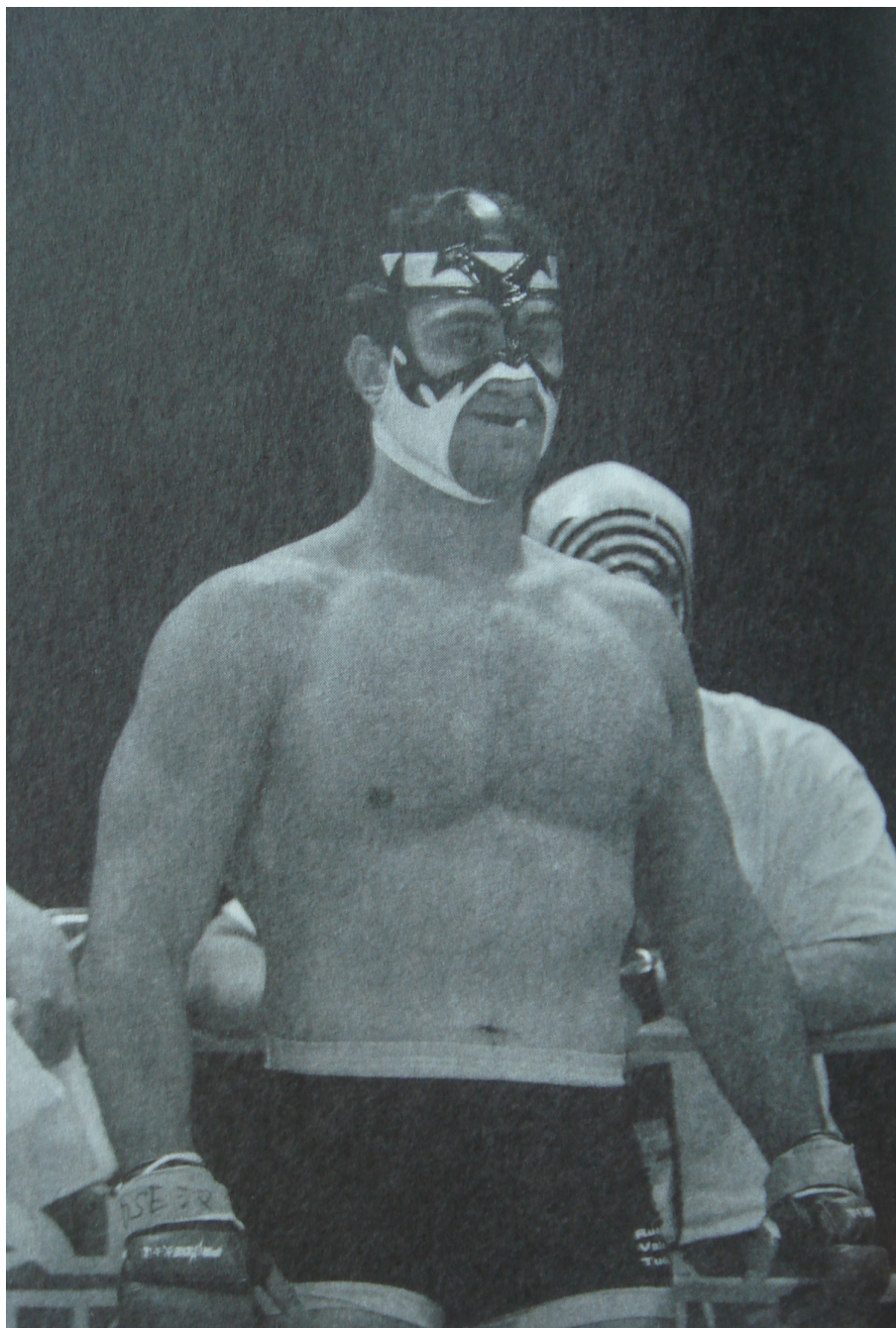


PHOTO - This is Dos Caras, Jr.'s MMA-use mask. To get over the problem of the mask blocking his vision during striking, the area around his eyes was opened up wider, but as you can see, his face is pretty much out there for the world to see. This loses the meaning of going out as a maskman, but even going so far as to do that, he didn't see Mirko's high kick.

Seven months later, March 2002, he lost the rematch, but he showed he belonged in MMA, taking another step in September of the same year, winning over UWF performer Tatsuaki Nakano. In his May 2003 match against Hiroyuki Itou, he was disqualified for grabbing the ropes, but his ferocious attacking stood out in people's minds, and further, he once again dislocated his opponent's shoulder, winning over UFC and RINGS KOK Tournament veteran Brad Kohler, having accomplished some solid things in MMA.

Dos Jr. started learning under Marco "King of the Streets" Ruas in the US, shedding, "a Luchador also trying his hand at MMA" for, "an MMA fighter who came from Lucha." For him as well, a match against Mirko as an MMA fighter was a top fight and a once in a lifetime chance.

After the match had been decided, Dos Jr. told people surrounding the event, "No problem, I should win," having amassed experience training striking. With his huge physique and Greco-roman wrestling, this monster, Dos Jr., stated his thoughts with regard to K-1 fighter Mirko, "If I can get him to grapple, I'll win." However, the result was to follow the fate of another pro-wrestler, an esteemed Japanese, originally a Greco-roman wrestler, Yuji Nagata.....

At this time, Dos Jr. stated, "I would like to take the Mirko fight without wearing the mask." In order to tie up any loose ends and fight as well as he could, he was even going so far as to say that he wanted to throw away the

legendary character he had built up as a pro-wrestler. For the first time that a maskman would fight in PRIDE, and further for his opponent to be Mirko, there were voices of safety concerns, so the organizers for the time being agreed.

Inside DSE, there was a scene where there were arguments, "Without the mask, there's no point in having Dos Jr. in PRIDE!" but this was coped with by the argument, "If this famous maskman fighter will go so far as to fling off his legendary mask to put it on the line, we can develop that story and flip things over so that the fans love it."

But at this point, something completely unexpected happened. To Dos Jr., who was making his biggest move, taking control of his own destiny and deciding to shed the mask from now on, came a, "Not so fast" from his elders. Of course, this was his real father, Dos Caras, and his uncle, Mil Máscaras.

In reality, in the Mexican pro-wrestling world, there is a discouraging rule that after a maskman shows his true face, he can never wear that mask in a match ever again. Máscaras and Caras had been, for many years, protecting that rule. So, if one of the Máscaras lineage were to fling off that mask, it would be completely unforgivable.

But in this new generation there was some space with the mask. Maskmen made up 70% of Mexican pro-wrestlers, all showing miraculous attachment to the masks, but the Luchadors of the young generation were

showing weaker attachment. So, the masked wrestlers moving to the WWE and WCW were throwing off their masks like it was nothing. One such example would be Rey Mysterio, Jr. who later went on to wear a mask again (which would be taboo according to the Mexican standards), among others. For the young generation dry⁸⁸ thoughts like “If I can be successful, I’m not going to fuss over the mask” were spreading.

Dos Jr. fighting without the mask, the Máscaras brothers strictly opposing it, this was simply a generation gap. Under the pressure of his father and uncle, Dos Jr. gave up the idea of taking off the mask. But in the days leading up to the match, something unbelievable happened.

Dos Jr. suddenly whipped out a pair of scissors and start cutting out around the eye parts of his own mask!

He was thinking the traditional mask shrinks your field of vision becoming a complete nuisance (yeah, of course). Of course, looking like it was after the scissor job, it was shameful, but he handed over the mask to a professional who made the right alterations, and the mask was returned to him exactly on the day of the fight. In any case, circumstances were made such that, “he won’t take off the mask, and the mask won’t bother him.”

⁸⁸ Wet/dry as explained above.

But without even a minute passing in the match, he lost by high kick KO..... Coming out of his trance, Dos Jr.'s line, "Where did my head go?" became another testament to the power of Mirko's high kick.

After this, Dos Jr. fought once more in PRIDE (losing a decision against Kazuhiro Nakamura in February of the next year), not achieving much in his Japanese MMA career. After a two-year blank, he went on to compete in Mexican and Honduran MMA, and recently he joined the WWE, making his formal entry into America.

For Máscaras, who was so against his nephew taking off his mask, was he okay with this "can see his face" mask? If so, wouldn't it have been fine just to take the whole thing off? That point is a bit hard to understand.

File 023

The ultimate foreign pro-wrestler – Vader to fight in PRIDE

In the past there had been many pro-wrestlers that had fought in PRIDE, but the appearance of the “emperor” Big Van Vader had also gotten to the very end of preparations. It was a plan that, if it had been made reality, would have had everyone talking – exactly why did it end a phantom?

It goes without saying that PRIDE’s launching point was Nobuhiko Takada vs. Rickson Gracie. In that fight, the man called “the strongest” within the pro-wrestling world, Takada, would represent pro-wrestling, to challenge the legendary champion Rickson Gracie in a dream bout. In the beginning of Japanese MMA, “measuring the strength of pro-wrestlers” was one of the essential themes. Riding that wave, in 1995, Kendou Nagasaki who was 47 at the time also competed in an MMA ring (and in an event put on by Shooto), so it can only be said that it was an amazing time.

At the time, pro-wrestling fans were wrapped up in their fantasies, hoping for “a pro-wrestler that will make waves for us in MMA.”

And inside that, there was a foreign wrestler that would have allowed them to carry on their fantasies. He had had wild matches in NJPW against Antonio Inoki, Tatsumi Fujinami⁸⁹ and Shinya Hashimoto, going on to a fierce battle against Takada in UWF-International, he was called “Gaijin Resura-Saikyou”⁹⁰ – Vader.

Not only was he huge, at 190 cm and 170 kg, he also had the speed that comes with being a pro American Football player, and that was also combined with the agility to pull off moonsaults left and right. As well, he had boxing experience, and there were rumors during his time in WWE like, “He was just too powerful, I couldn’t absorb his attacks,” so there were plenty of fans at the start of Japanese MMA in the 90’s thinking, “If there’s anyone that could make it in MMA, it would be Vader!”

Vader actually had been booked once for an MMA event. It was U-JAPAN held at Ariake Coliseum in November 1996. The concept (as said at the time) was to pit pro-wrestlers, Yoji Anjou, Mitsuhiro Matsunaga⁹¹, Katsumi Usuda, against MMA fighters in the matchmaking, with Vader’s opponent being Kimo in the main event.

⁸⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatsumi_Fujinami

⁹⁰ “The Strongest Foreign Wrestler”

⁹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitsuhiro_Matsunaga

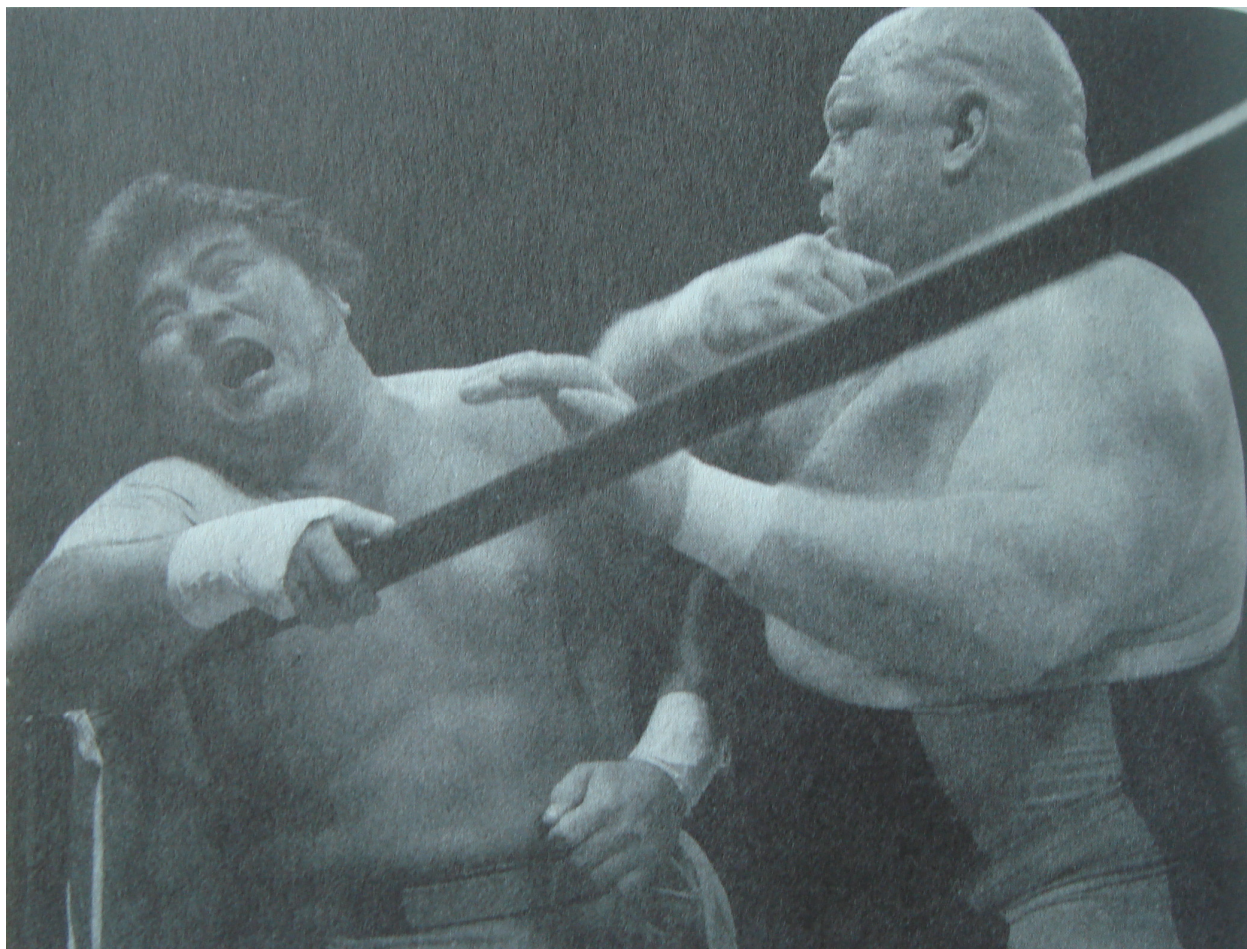


PHOTO – January 4, 2004, in HUSTLE 1, coughing blood on Maeda though he made it without trouble up into the ring – Vader. However, not in the best of shape, his movement was slow, leading to a dull challenger match. With him like this, perhaps it would be best for him not to step into the PRIDE ring.

The matchmaking talks didn't work out in the end, and in his place, Crusher Bam Bam Bigelow fought. He suffered a loss to Kimo a bit over two minutes into the match. The event ended with everyone from the pro-wrestler side, including female Yoko Takahashi, being defeated.

Bigelow along with Vader was working in NJPW at the time, and of course he also was a huge and agile top foreigner, but to rank them, Vader was above. They also became tag team champions, but there was a strong impression that Bigelow was just supporting cast for Vader.

So, still, pro-wrestling fans believed, "Well, Bigelow was no good, but if it were Vader....." or maybe it was just that he was the only one left.

From the start, many pro-wrestlers appeared in PRIDE, but the number that were successful is few, counting Alexander Otsuka, Kazushi Sakuraba, and a few others. A feeling started spreading that it was wasteful seeing these repeated slayings and that, "Pro-wrestling and MMA are just different," and the appearance of pro-wrestlers in MMA started to become less and less of a talking point. Not to mention Mirko Crocop, who had dispatched with a number of famous pro-wrestlers including Kazuyuki Fujita as the "pro-wrestler hunter," peeling the skin right off of the "pro-wrestler fantasy."

Vader's name was raised in the second half of 2003. Brought to PRIDE by an unnamed person, he related that Vader was expressing interest in PRIDE.

But at this point, Vader was already 48. He was in his 30s when he appeared in NJPW, and he was 38 when he had his match in U-Inter against Takada. It's an age that wouldn't be a problem in pro-wrestling, but to be at the top in MMA, after all, he was too old.

As well, besides having absolutely no experience in MMA, adding up his career in NJPW, U-Inter, WWE, All-Japan [Pro-Wrestling], Noah, he must have been dealing with many built-up injuries. Even if they decided suddenly to use him, it wouldn't have been strange at all if he hesitated.

At the time, DSE was working to put together Bushido at the exact time as HUSTLE. From that, a plan was formed, "Let's have him appear in HUSTLE first, and then maybe put him in Bushido." There would be no problem for Vader to work in HUSTLE, and Bushido was a place where experimental matches could happen outside of PRIDE, so it made some sense.

Like this, Vader came to Japan to face off against Shinya Hashimoto in HUSTLE 1 on January 4, 2004. But then something unbelievable happened. Vader's condition was poorer than anyone had expected.

The first thing to strike the staff upon seeing Vader when he arrived in Japan was that he appeared to have difficulty walking down stairs by himself. It is easy for pro-wrestlers to injure their knees, and not a few of them have

trouble walking when they get out of the ring. Vader didn't fall outside of that group, and to ask "Are you alright?" must have been natural at the time.

But this wasn't the only incident. The day before the match, he was vomiting blood in his hotel room! His body was wearing the scars of a lifetime of damage, and not even thinking about PRIDE, having something happen in the HUSTLE ring would not have been unexpected. In the end, his HUSTLE match went on as planned, but with his poor ability to move, this ended up being a one-time affair, and naturally, plans to use him in PRIDE disappeared.

Even in normal circumstances, there have been a number of pro-wrestlers that have died. The year before this as well, 2002, saw Davey Boy Smith die at the young age of 39, leaving behind grieving fans. If it came to be a case of "Famous wrestler, died in PRIDE," PRIDE itself may have been driven into the extinction. It wasn't the case where they could just ignore some problems and put him in anyway.

It was like this that Vader's appearance in PRIDE became a phantom, but if it had happened in his 30s when his power was at its peak, in the era before all the theories had been established in MMA, what kind of fight would he have shown us..... Or maybe for it to end just a fantasy was for the best. But looking at Brock Lesnar, who went from the WWE to the UFC, it does make us wish we could have seen the manly figure of Vader in that armor and helmet blowing smoke in the PRIDE ring.

File 024

“Bushido” - fateful crisis up until the creation of the light-middleweight weight class

When you think of PRIDE Bushido, you think of it mainly focused on the light and middleweight divisions, a lighter-weight PRIDE..... that's pretty much the image everyone has of it now. But that concept was a matter of an all-or-nothing gamble that was proposed in earnest only after Bushido suffered a life or death crisis.

At the start, Bushido was to be an event that raised up Japanese fighters, an event to deal with foreign fighter contracts, an experimental laboratory, etc. As an event couldn't be made based around second-string players, they added in the idea of experimental matchmaking, as described previously.

But no matter how much it could be called a secondary brand, it was wearing the PRIDE name, so there couldn't be so big of a drop in the scale of things. They wouldn't be able to hold events at [small venues like] Kouraken Hall or Differ Ariake. So, there was a need to put fighters that had a name into

the main event and some of the other bouts, and they needed to also invite foreign fighters (along with contracts).

To establish a new brand requires time. On top of that, they somehow couldn't establish a direction, strengthening the difficulty in imagining success. As one of the elements they were looking to, lighter-weight Japanese fighters, no one really appeared besides the conspicuous rise of Takanori Gomi. Particularly, at Bushido 1, with the Japanese fighters vs. Gracies idea, not only did both Kazuhiro Hamanaka and Daiju Takase lose their matches, the entrances and bouts were widely panned as "lacking a pro feel."

DSE, feeling that Bushido should be watched over from a distance to an extent, came to understand the opinions as further events were put on. The peak of this was the October 2004 PRIDE Bushido 5 event held at Osaka-jo Hall.

Bushido, which had been putting on events at Saitama Super Arena and Yokohama Arena, and which had good connections to Yokohama Arena, made its first move to another region with its July 2004 Bushido 4 event at Nagoya Rainbow Hall. This was because President Sakakibara and spokesperson Saeki were originally from Nagoya, and while Mirko Crocop had consecutively fought at all four Bushido events up until this point, holding Bushido 5 at Osaka-jo Hall was, even in the best of conditions, a disadvantage, and neither him nor any other top heavyweight fighters appeared. It was the first event in which

Takanori Gomi got the main event bout, but while he had racked up three consecutive KO wins, his push into the mainstream was still far in the future. Getting the main event in Osaka was, it could be said, cruel.



PHOTO – May 2005. From PRIDE Bushido 7, making a renewal focused on the lighter-weight classes, it became a huge success showing exciting victories in consecutive matches. Especially, the main event, Takanori Gomi vs. Luiz Azeredo, was a striking, go-out-on-their-shields battle. The popularity of the lighter-weight divisions these days all comes from this event.

This day, Charles “Krazy Horse” Bennett also cleanly cinched his fourth consecutive victory but the bout failed to move the fans at all. And as would be expected from fighting at -83kg where he couldn’t use his real power, Hayato “Mach” Sakurai lost; the overall results were poor, and finally from DSE erupted, “Bushido: Unnecessary.” It is said that after the Osaka event, there was extreme agitation at the meetings. It would not have been strange at this point if Bushido was extinguished.

It escaped from extinguishment, and after a half-year blank, Bushido 6 was held in April of the next year, with the main event being Fedor Emelianenko vs. Tsuyoshi Kohsaka, and further, this year, with the middleweight tournament to determine the bracket for the GP happening, the value of Bushido was raised. While lighter-weight fighters were participating, it appeared inevitable that talks would always go on focused on the heavy and middleweight divisions.

As well at this time, the appeal of PRIDE was at its peak and it was spreading throughout the world. In the 2004 heavyweight GP, Fedor, Mirko, and Nogueira, the top three forces forming a tomoe⁹² appeared, and with Naoya Ogawa, Sergei Kharitonov and Kevin Randleman forcing their way through, it was a huge success with the fans. Also with the injection of middleweight bouts including the then hugely popular Wanderlei Silva and

⁹² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomoe>

Quinton "Rampage" Jackson, there was no way it would not be interesting. Without doubt, it was a time when the world was thinking, "If you say MMA, you mean PRIDE."

In the midst of that, Bushido, with its focus on the welter and light-weight divisions, was in a state with people asking, "Is this the same PRIDE?" Just for example to say that they were to be merged in with the main PRIDE number series and GP events, no matter how great the battles were they put on, they would lose that battle in appeal and popularity. This was surely the peak of PRIDE's lighter-weight division birth pains.

The idea of "Bushido: Unnecessary" rose again, and it was moving more and more closer to a decision to shut it down, when some staff presented the plan to make Bushido a "lighter-weight specialist" event. No more mixing them up with the heavyweights, establish Takanori Gomi at the top and only put on fights in the lighter weight categories. If that's no good, oh well. Please let us try it, even if it is the last..... went their entreaty.

The plan was accepted, and Bushido went through a renewal as an event specializing in lighter weight class matches. At a hotel within Tokyo, a number of Japanese fighters including Gomi and Mach gathered, and a huge press conference was put on. But at that meeting, what came from chief Takada's

mouth was the ever-unsparing words, among others, “If Bushido puts on disappointing⁹³ fights, I’m shutting it down.”

Of course, this wasn’t just Takada’s personal opinion on the matter. He was speaking on behalf of DSE. Bushido, at the edge of the precipice, brought in Tatsuya Kawajiri to clash with Takanori Gomi, gathering attention and becoming a spectacular success.

The main factors were placing Takanori Gomi at the top, causing Bushido’s camera blur to disappear, and the success in making the concept easier to understand for the audience. This year’s light and welter GP excited the fans to a great extent, and in the finals on New Year’s Eve, with Gomi winning over Mach to become the first Japanese champion, one could say that the lighter weights were firmly established.

In 2006 came the Fuji Shock, with the severely needed golden time slot terrestrial broadcast ending like a phantom, but in the lighter weight categories, popular fighters like Akihiro Gono, Kazuo Misaki, Mitsuhiro Ishida and Shinya Aoki came one after another in great numbers. From the end of the same year until the spring of 2007, its popularity was recognized and Bushido and the number series were merged.

⁹³ fugainai - disappointing, weak-minded, spiritless, cowardly, worthless.

In the background of all this was not just the fact that now mixing them with the heavyweights wouldn't cause them to lose name popularity, but there is also the fact that many fighters were moving to the UFC, causing a shortage of hands. For Bushido that had come to be through the inclusion of heavyweight bouts, it was now responsible for saving the PRIDE core's existence.

And a while later, Gomi, Mach, Aoki, Kawajiri, Ishida, originally Bushido fighters, appeared in all of the main Japanese events, being the nucleus of later events including DREAM and Sengoku. In the nick of time, the abandoned children, the Bushido fighters, returned the favor in the end to Japanese MMA, so this isn't a perfectly happy story.

At the time when Bushido was facing its existential crisis, if they had not hit upon the plan of turning it into a specialist event for lighter-weight fighters, today's world of MMA may not have come to exist.

File 025

The plan for PRIDE Bushido to air on Japanese national terrestrial broadcast television

Having gained popularity through the Fuji TV live broadcasts, with the explosive shock of the contract cancellation, the so-called “Fuji TV Shock,” PRIDE received crippling damage. PRIDE, giving the impression of having walked this far together with Fuji, had actually thought up plans for live broadcasts on another channel. That was with Nippon TV⁹⁴, which had had a somehow deep relation with the fighting arts!

2003, when PRIDE Bushido had started, the main PRIDE events were already being broadcast during golden time on Fuji TV, surely a time approaching their peak. Naturally, their final aim was also to get their newly started brand, Bushido, in during golden time as well.

Broadcasting of Bushido, slightly after the start, happened on the weekend ten days or two weeks after the event, in the middle of the night or

⁹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nippon_Television

late evening, in a one-hour schedule. Of course, most of the fights were presented in an abridged digest form, and only a limited number of bouts were shown. Even if it is good overall to have broadcasting on television, there would be no expectations of spreading throughout the world with this timeslot.

Still, during these early days of Bushido, they had yet to find even a direction for the events and they hadn't yet gotten a stable supply of fans, so the mood was generally that it couldn't be helped, but even after switching to the lighter-weight plan and suddenly rising in popularity, they just couldn't get things with the Fuji broadcasts changed for the better.

And then, what DSE schemed was the, "strategy to sell Bushido broadcasting to another channel." This was right in the midst of what was Japan's MMA boom. Looking at it from the background of the highly popular PRIDE brand, a television station without an MMA broadcast made for delicious talks. However, TBS already had K-1 WORLD MAX and the MMA event HERO'S. So the key channel was narrowed down to either TV Asahi⁹⁵ or Nippon TV. Of those, the candidate selected was Nippon TV.

At first glance, PRIDE and Nippon TV seem to have no point of contact, but in actuality, it is said that at the time when PRIDE was first hoisting their flag, through a middleman, they were making moves to broadcast PRIDE 1 on

⁹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TV_Asahi

Nippon TV. At that time, in 1997, the K-1 GP was broadcast on Fuji TV, but the K-1 JAPAN series broadcast on Nippon TV had not yet started.



PHOTO – Bushido 11, June 4, 2006. The Fuji TV broadcasting was decided to be scheduled just six days later, but due to it being cut, it was thrown in the warehouse. Just before Bushido was going to win its heart's desire and get broadcasted on terrestrial television, it was nipped in the bud.

Prepared with the support of a famous marketing firm, it seemed that the plan would go through, but the decision reached within Nippon TV was “no.” The world had generally yet to understand MMA, and voices were raised, saying things easily imagined such as, “Showing face punches from the mounted position on terrestrial TV would be far too much” or, “We know Nobuhiko Takada, but who is this Rickson Gracie guy?”

Nippon TV had for many years been broadcasting NJPW and Pro-wrestling Noah, but whether the upper divisions recognized the difference between pro-wrestling and MMA is a big question.

Later, Nippon TV started broadcasting K-1 JAPAN in 1998 (until 2004), also broadcasting “INOKI BOM-BA-YE” (Inoki-matsuri), LEGEND, etc., but overall, it didn’t achieve the level of success in it that Fuji TV had.

As well, at the 2003 New Year’s Eve Inoki-matsuri, it was wrapped up in the troubles and dramas that came along with the event, losing badly to Fuji and TBS in the NYE MMA battle.

This even developed into a legal case between them and the promotion company in charge of organizing the event. Due to this, the higher-ups in Nippon TV developed a long-lasting allergy to MMA, which is not unexpected. It could even be said to be on the level of trauma.

In those circumstances, getting MMA on Nippon TV had its problems. And to DSE, the existence of Nippon TV carried the nuance of shaking up Fuji.

As written previously, a single promotion being carried on more than one station had already been seen with K-1. It was a strategy wherein, under the public position of "Let's work in the direction of making DSE like that," they'd play, "After all, it got popular, so if they won't do it there, we'll take it elsewhere," hoping to get Fuji anxious.

Whether this shaking up worked cannot be established (well, we can say that Bushido became popular), but there was a tentative decision to air the welterweight GP 2nd round on Fuji's golden time.

This event saw Akihiro Gono's performance dressed as DJ GOZMA for his ring entrance, and all of the fights were superb. Now it was just time to get the official contract and official announcement.....

The same day of the event, what was announced was the termination of the contract! Sakakibara and others announced the cut of broadcasting while Fuji quietly, though in an imperative fashion, posted it on their webpage. Of course, the event that had just been put on would be thrown in the warehouse. Suddenly and precipitately taking a sudden turn, it surely was heaven and hell.

Spring of this year, Gomi stated boastfully at the press conference the day before he lost to Marcus Aurelio, ending his run for the most consecutive

wins record, "This year, we are going to get golden!" The first Japanese PRIDE champion, Gomi knew completely that his own fame and popularity rising further would require none but golden time broadcasting.

And they must have been thinking about the fact that TBS was broadcasting HERO'S during golden time, which had started working with the lighter-weight divisions as well, expanding the names of famous fighters including Genki Sudo, Caol Uno, Norifumi "Kid" Yamamoto, Hideo Tokoro, etc. It was a dilemma for the Bushido fighters that extended to the fans as well, "But it's us that are putting on the craziest of crazy fights!" Especially Gomi, who was friends with Genki Sudo and had trained with him, had particular trouble with the TV stations.

The day when Bushido would be on golden time and the dilemma would be wiped away would come..... it should have, but then PRIDE itself fell into a life or death crisis.

Without recovering from the bad situation, and without receiving a killing blow either, finally in spring of the next year, 2007, PRIDE was turned over to UFC owner Lorenzo Fertitta. But likely due to Nippon TV's trigger pull, the curtain closed for good on this history.

In autumn 2008, a new event, Sengoku, was formed with Gomi as the nucleus, with him again and again at press conferences and the like making

requests for TV broadcasting. The time and the place changed, but Gomi's love for trying to "make his debut on the world stage through terrestrial broadcasting" hasn't changed at all.

PRIDE Fighters' Unknown Stories 5

Kazuo Misaki

"In my fight against Dan Henderson, for the first time, I experienced fear like a wild animal."

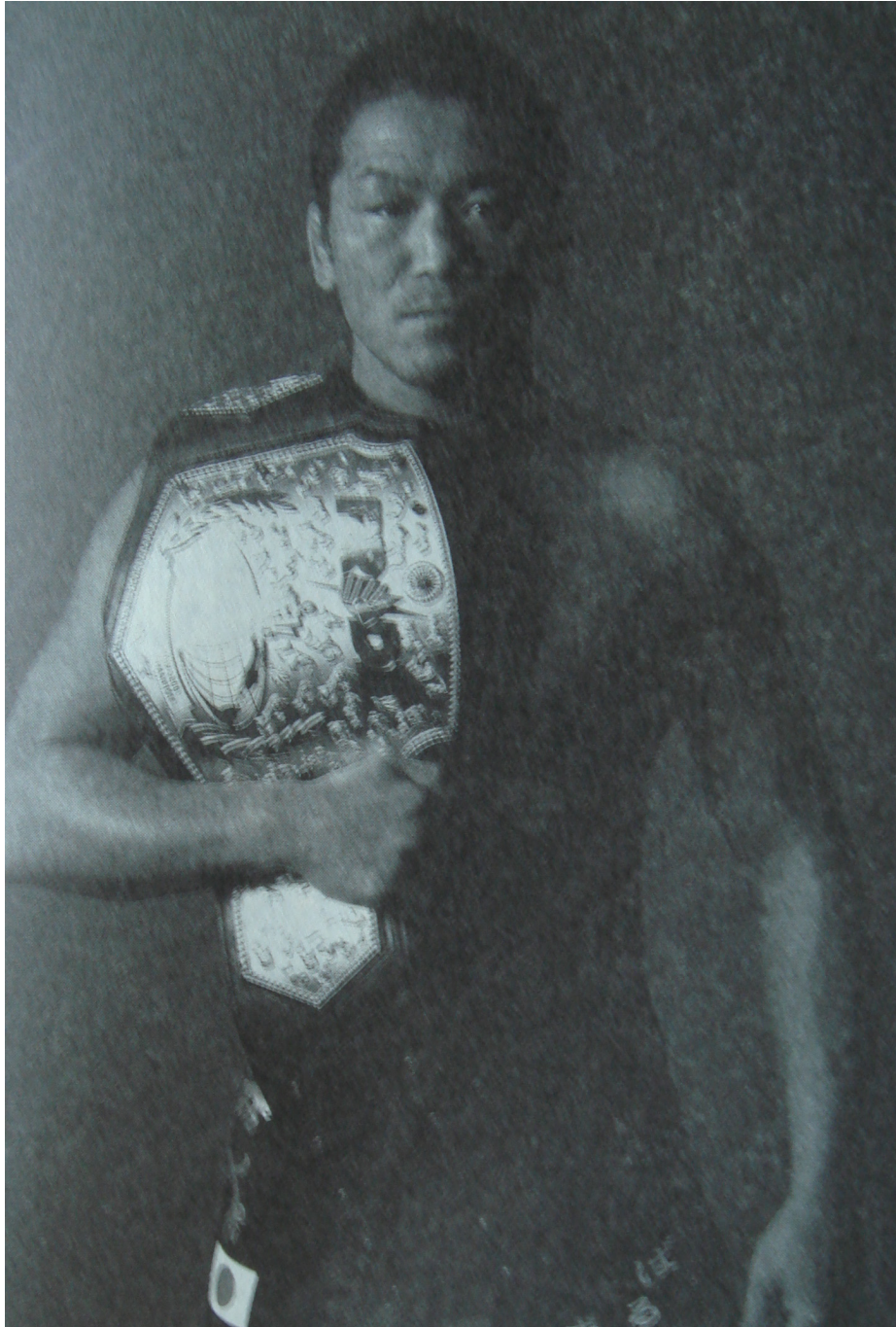


PHOTO – Kazuo Misaki. Born April 25, 1976, Chiba prefecture. In his amateur era, he joined GRABAKA, making his pro debut in Pancrase in 2001. Started competing in PRIDE from May 2004. In 2006, he made waves, winning the welterweight GP. KO'd Yoshihiro Akiyama at the NYE 2007 Yarennoka! Event (later changed to a no-contest). Now, mainly competing in Sengoku. 179 cm. 83 kg.

Interviewer: Originally, what made you aim to become an MMA fighter was Takada vs. Rickson, wasn't it?

Misaki: What made me aim to become, not an MMA fighter, but the world's strongest man, was Takada vs. Rickson. Because before that, I didn't even really know the term "MMA."

Interviewer: You did judo all through school, right?

Misaki: Yes. Middle school, high school, I did judo. Later, I went to college and I did judo once again, I guess it was because I was young, but my thoughts of wanting to have fun grew and grew. Judo took all my time in middle and high school and I didn't have much time to have fun. At my high school graduation, I quit the idea of moving on to college and spent about five years having fun.

Interviewer: Having fun, what kind of life was it?

Misaki: Surfing. I wanted to be popular with girls so I started (laughing). Going to the beach, it's like, it isn't a sport, but it isn't just playing either, it gave me a strange sense. I started going to the beach every day, and, inside me, there's a strong connection with judo, so I wasn't simply doing surfing, I was doing "surfing-do."

Interviewer: Something to master.

Misaki: Going to the beach about 350 days out of the year, I continued living like that for about five years, but once in awhile on TV I would see one of my judo rivals from when I was in school, up there competing and I would get really melancholic. At that instant, inside me was a feeling like, "I couldn't get over judo through surfing." But if I returned to judo, I would be starting at the beginning and I wasn't of the age to aim for the Olympics, so the thought couldn't go anywhere, worrying endlessly, weight training, running, and at that time I learned of Rickson.

Interviewer: What attracted you about Rickson?

Misaki: Wanting to be strong. And the world's strongest man isn't decided in judo, not in karate, I thought it was in a fight where anything goes. So, anything goes, then I was attracted to MMA.

Interviewer: So you started MMA, joined GRABAKA, and made your pro debut in Pancrase, right. And when did PRIDE come into your consciousness?

Misaki: From the start. When I started MMA, I would go myself and buy tickets to watch the events and stuff. Like, I would see Gary Goodridge's fight, all excited that there were so many tough guys all around the world. But I also thought, "to be number one in the world, I'm going to have to get better than these guys," it felt at the time like a goal a long way off.

Interviewer: Well, it was before you had gone pro, so... right?

Misaki: From that time, I held a feeling that, "Without fail, I will be in a match in front of a ton of people watching." But it wasn't like I could just suddenly jump up into something like PRIDE, I was thinking to get up there one step at a time.

Interviewer: When did you have the real feeling that you wanted to appear in PRIDE?

Misaki: From when I became a pro, the feeling was already there, but like a series, first, stand at the top of Pancrase, then I wanted to go into PRIDE. Pancrase was, after all, my "base" at the time, so to protect Pancrase, and to fight from Pancrase on the stage of PRIDE, that's what I was thinking I wanted to do. But before then, I had occasionally gotten chances, and I was allowed to fight in PRIDE Bushido.

Interviewer: Your first time was PRIDE Bushido 3 against Jorge "Macaco" Patino, what do you remember from that?

Misaki: I wasn't really up on MMA, so I didn't even know who Macaco was. But hearing his fight record and MMA history, I thought, "This guy is different from the guys I've been fighting in Pancrase, he's a hell of a fighter." But to fight on this stage, I also have to fight against guys like him. With the sense that I'm plunging into a live-or-die world, I took on the Macaco fight.

Interviewer: Your second fight in PRIDE was against Daniel Acacio, do you have painful memories of your decision loss?

Misaki: Yeah. Well, I don't mean to make any excuses, but if I were to be asked if my condition had been perfect at the time, I think I would say no. But that was as much as I could do. But this loss was, for me at the time, big. Really, I can talk about it now, but I had planned to beat Acacio and go into the tournament.

Interviewer: Into the welterweight GP.

Misaki: But I lost to Acacio, and I lost that chance, and it felt like I had hit bottom, but so many people reached out their hands to me, and I was given another chance in DEEP.

Interviewer: In DEEP, you fought against Akira Shoji, right.

Misaki: In that fight, the results were good, but somehow it gave me confidence. After all, if you think of Shoji, he's a guy I had been watching all the way back since the start of PRIDE, and the name "Son of Japan"⁹⁶ really fit him, he's a fighter I like and look up to. To fight and win against someone like that, it gave me major confidence in myself. So, I think there was a reason for my

⁹⁶ Shoji was considered one of the true representatives of Japanese men, stoic, humble, hard-working, and his hair wasn't dyed and he didn't act wild like many of the other Japanese fighters.

loss in the Acacio fight. The bigger the trial gets, if you pass, I think that's the growth of a person.

Interviewer: And after that, you went on to fight Dan Henderson, I'm guessing the deepest impression you have from PRIDE is your two fights against him.

Misaki: Yeah. It really was, after finishing the fight against Shoji, as my return bout in PRIDE, suddenly it was Dan. I had confidence then. "I'll even win against 'DanHen'."

Interviewer: Wow, so from the start you had confidence in winning over Henderson?

Misaki: After all, from being able to fight Shoji, confidence came with that, I had a new feeling of pride as a Japanese, or something like a feeling of that I had pride in myself as a Japanese. "I'm Japanese so I'll definitely win." Of course, I don't mean anything strange. I believed in myself, I believed in being Japanese, that thought grew in me.

Interviewer: As a Japanese, you had confidence in yourself.

Misaki: So I thought DanHen is just another human like me. Two arms, two legs, two eyes, another human being. So I was thinking like "If he's just another human being, then there's no way the Japanese me will lose." Well,

the result was that I lost (bitter smile). Also, my fight with DanHen was the first time in the MMA fights that I'd fought up til then in which I felt fear in a bout. That fear, it wasn't like a fear of getting hit or something like that, I felt the real power of animal instinct in DanHen.

Interviewer: The power of animal instinct?

Misaki: I'm always saying it but no matter how ripped and muscular a guy is, or no matter how technical he is, that isn't really scary. For me, the scariest is a guy with the instincts of a wild animal, and DanHen was the first, I thought, "This guy, he's an amazing animal."



PHOTO – 2006, Misaki having participated in the PRIDE welterweight GP, victorious in his second match against Dan Henderson. In the quarter-finals, he lost to Paulo Filho but due to Filho's injury, he took his place, winning over Denis Kang in spectacular fashion. Celebrating, sitting on the shoulders of 3rd-place finisher in the same GP, Akihiro Gono.

Interviewer: What about him made you think of him as “an amazing animal”?

Misaki: He had the look of a sharpened beast, or the sense of smell, my feeling when we faced off. It was the same feeling like staring down a wild animal. It was my first time against an opponent like that, and after the match ended, I was like, “What the hell was that guy?” “What is that creature!?” I remember it strongly.

Interviewer: Thinking he was just another human being, then you fight him and he turns out your feeling then is that he’s a beast.

Misaki: Yeah, it was really close to that. It was an opponent with really polished instincts.

Interviewer: And as for a highlight of you in PRIDE, you would have to include your accomplished revenge against Henderson and your spectacular victory in the welterweight GP, so for you, what was the meaning of this event?

Misaki: It was an event that really helped me grow as a person. So much happened, along with me winning. Winning over DanHen, losing once earlier in the tournament, and then having been given the chance to go back into the thing, and then being able to win it. Inside me, I really felt that I grew, each time I fought and in the times in between. Not just in terms of MMA, but I think growth as a human. Every time I’m facing a new fight, at that time, there is really a lot of fear, pain, there’s pressure too, and each time I get so close to

saying “I want to run away” in my thoughts, and in the midst of that circle, I think that I grow.

Interviewer: From each battle scene in the welterweight GP, you helped yourself to grow.

Misaki: Looking back now, I think that the biggest turning point for me was just when I was around 30. It was a big time for me in terms of personal growth, and I think that it was just at that time that, thanks to being able to fight in PRIDE, I was able to grow. When I went into the welterweight GP, PRIDE had already lost its Fuji TV broadcasting, and it was a hard time, and I thought that we should all ride in the same boat together until the end. To be able to have that kind of experience on that kind of stage wouldn't have been possible except in PRIDE.

Interviewer: The meaning of being on the PRIDE stage was different from everything else?

Misaki: Yeah. I guess a fight is a fight, no matter what ring it takes place in. But really for me, it was a stage I longed to be on, ever since I had first started in MMA, and to actually get up there, it was like there were apparitions lurking, it was a place almost like that. It was also a place that felt like you had to fight for your life to survive. It was a place, just like its name states, where I could put my “pride” on the line and fight.

Interviewer: You also, in your last fight in PRIDE, were able to fight in America, in Las Vegas (against Frank Trigg).

Misaki: That was a big experience for me, that event in Las Vegas. My frustrations had become a kind of power spring. I learned a lot there, including the too-lenient nature of Japanese people. I think that was revived again, this time in my fight at the Playboy Mansion (September 20, 2008, his match in Strikeforce against Joe Riggs)

Interviewer: After Lorenzo Fertitta became the new owner of PRIDE in April of 2007, there was a time then when PRIDE just couldn't get an event going, what did you think at that time?

Misaki: At that time, I really didn't feel any rush. Because I think that everything sort of lives inside the natural flow of things. After all, like natural law, if there's a clear day, there's also going to be a rainy day. So, to be honest, while there were some bad and rough things about PRIDE being bought, I thought about it as being the same as the weather. It's not like PRIDE could just continually have sunny days, rather, it needs to rain or no flowers will bloom. So, I thought of it as nothing but a long rain and that without fail sunny days would also come.

Interviewer: A time to wait out MMA's rainy season?

Misaki: I had fought six times in 2006, and so I also had a need for some downtime, so I was thinking to rest in 2007. So I didn't feel any rush and there was no insecurity, rather, I was having a good time (laughing).

Interviewer: Yeah really, maybe it was because of the lull in 2007 that Yarennoka! was able to explode on New Year's Eve.

Misaki: Yeah, we had saved our energy.

Interviewer: You told me that when you first planned to fight in PRIDE, you planned to represent Pancrase, but did you have a feeling that you were representing PRIDE when you fought against Yoshihiro Akiyama at Yarennoka!?

Misaki: Yeah, that was one of my strong feelings at the time. After beating Akiyama (later, it was changed to a no-contest), first I was just thinking that it was good that I won, but good for who, good for the people that came to see it, it was good that I won for the people that were rooting for me, that's what I was thinking at first. That fight was, I was the PRIDE champion, and Akiyama was the HERO'S champion. I think it was a match where people were thinking like "which one is stronger?" I was of course also thinking, "I believe in PRIDE, and I have to fight for the fans that have come to root for me these past ten years." So, I couldn't say it at the time, but I felt like I was carrying PRIDE on my shoulders.

Interviewer: That was your first time fighting with such roaring cheers from the fans, wasn't it.

Misaki: Yeah. That really helped to push me, but it also put me under a lot of pressure, but having the confidence from having come to fight at the world's highest level in PRIDE, I think that is why I was able to put on that fight.



PHOTO – 2007 New Year's Eve, in Yarennoka! as PRIDE welterweight champion, fighting against the HERO's middleweight tournament 2006 winner Yoshihiro Akiyama. With the roaring cheers of PRIDE fans, Misaki scored a huge KO. Later, the high kick that ended the fight was declared against the rules and the fight was changed to a no-contest, but the fight acted as the big break for Misaki.

Interviewer: It is because of PRIDE that you are who you are today?

Misaki: Yeah, that's why New Year's Eve last year, more than training and so on, it was about myself. Looking toward that match, honestly, it was really hard for me, but I wanted to pass that trial without running away, and I think that is what made me who I am. More than whether I would win or lose that fight, it was a feeling of gratitude for how I was able to live my life, to amass experiences like that made me very grateful.

Interviewer: It was more important to you than winning that you made it through the battlefield.

Misaki: I think so. And what gave me that experience on the battlefield more than anything was PRIDE. After all, the more times you get up there, the more and more you really get from it. Every fight in PRIDE really means a lot to me. Deciding to go into the Macaco fight with the feeling that it was live-or-die, feeling the pride of being Japanese in the fight with Shoji, my feeling of fear when first fighting DanHen. Getting through all of that, and then fighting to the very end in the welterweight GP, I really felt that I had grown.

Interviewer: Every fight in PRIDE is blood and body.

Misaki: I think so. In the end, I am not so concerned with the results of a fight, I only think about how I'm finally going to live my life, with what kind of

feelings will I die. And for that, the life-and-death survival I lived on the stage in PRIDE was a major asset in my growth.

Interviewer: Your experience in PRIDE is still living inside you, isn't it.

Misaki: Yes.

Interviewer: So that must be why that now on the stage of Sengoku, you make calls into the mic like "Come see it!" in the style of PRIDE chief Nobuhiko Takada (laughing).

Misaki: You connected this with talking about the mic (laughing).

Interviewer: That's because when I think of you, I think of that you never give the mic back (laughing).

Misaki: But there's a reason for that "Come see it!" I think that the fans that rooted for me in PRIDE will recognize it as Takada's trademark line. And from that one line, I wanted to also say, "PRIDE still lives on in the Sengoku ring." Like, "The name isn't PRIDE but PRIDE's spirit lives on here and PRIDE-like fights happen here." But then why I didn't just say all that becomes another story (laughing).

Interviewer: Dahahaha! I didn't think there was all that meaning inside the "Come see it!"

Misaki: I'm always like that on the mic. I don't explain enough. Gono tells me I really suck when I'm on the mic so maybe it'd be better if I didn't talk. Like, ahh he went and did it again this time. But that time, they suddenly handed me the mic and told me, "please say something quick to wrap this up." But I was thinking, "But if it's me talking, there's no way it's going to be something quick."
(laughing)

Interviewer: And the words you were finally able to get out, "Come see it!" were said with the breath of PRIDE inside you.

Misaki: Yeah. The name of PRIDE doesn't exist in Japan anymore, but PRIDE still lives inside us. Really, because I would not be who I am had I not had the experience of PRIDE.

Chapter Six

PRIDE Invades America, and.....

June 2006, PRIDE passed its peak and started to fall with the cut-off of the Fuji TV broadcasts. Losing the money that came from the broadcasting rights, its exposure to the public also drastically dropped. A sudden turn after the peak, PRIDE once again met a life-or-death crisis.

Further, across the ocean, the UFC had gotten its big break. They were making huge profits from PPV and there was a meteoric rise in the fight money for its fighters. PRIDE, holding on to a number of the world's top fighters, was wrapped up in the money game of the UFC trying to acquire fighters, feeling a crisis within and outside the country.

Here, PRIDE thrashed out a formula to invade the US. America, having a larger-scale market than Japan, could provide PRIDE with profits that it had lost from no longer receiving the broadcasting rights money.

PRIDE put on a total of two shows in 2006 and 2007 in Las Vegas, both times to a sellout crowd. The events were overall successes, but Sakakibara's time-limited plan to get back on Japanese TV by New Year's Eve 2006 had failed, and in 2007, PRIDE was transferred to UFC owner Lorenzo Fertitta.

However, for PRIDE to continue on at this point, it was also an era of PRIDE's biggest plans ever.

In this last chapter, PRIDE: Secret Files will look into the secret projects PRIDE had for the world stage.

File 026

Just on the verge of happening – Takanori Gomi vs. WBC world super flyweight boxing champion Tokuyama

2006, the sudden drop of event broadcasting by Fuji, PRIDE in the midst of this predicament, yet moving ahead to put on, as was its established practice, a huge event on New Year's Eve, PRIDE Otoko-matsuri. The main draw for the event was rumored to be Takanori Gomi vs. Masamori Tokuyama⁹⁷.

The PRIDE lightweight champion vs. the boxing world champion. If this match were actually put on, there is no doubt that it would make talks around the world. It was also seen like, "Let's get this match and use it as a foothold to get back on terrestrial broadcasting."

The first rumors of Tokuyama fighting in PRIDE surfaced around November. On the 6th, Sports Tsuchi reported that Tokuyama had received an

⁹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masamori_Tokuyama

offer from PRIDE. Actually, Tokuyama confirmed that negotiations for his participation in PRIDE were ongoing.

Looking forward to its restoration of rights, PRIDE had made moves to create talk, going so far as to try to pluck a boxing world champion out from his place in the boxing world..... That tumultuous movement, according to a person related to DSE at the time, had originally come from a request made from Tokuyama's side.

According to that person, despite being world champion, Tokuyama didn't have much money saved. Normally, if you become a world champion, you fight in huge venues and you appear on television during golden time. Through the pay you receive from the event and the broadcasting rights money, you should be able to run a gym and make a living.

But it was the "winter" of boxing at the time. With the lack of fan interest and poor TV ratings, of course, Tokuyama's fight money also must have not been so high.

But while MMA had been taking a hit TV-wise, it had up until then been in a boom period for years, quite the opposite of the boxing scene. I have been told that it was in such a boom that, "if it consisted of big names, one match could be some tens of millions of yen [= hundreds of thousands of dollars]." It

wasn't a case of PRIDE using Tokuyama's name value, it was Tokuyama's side trying to ride the MMA boom.

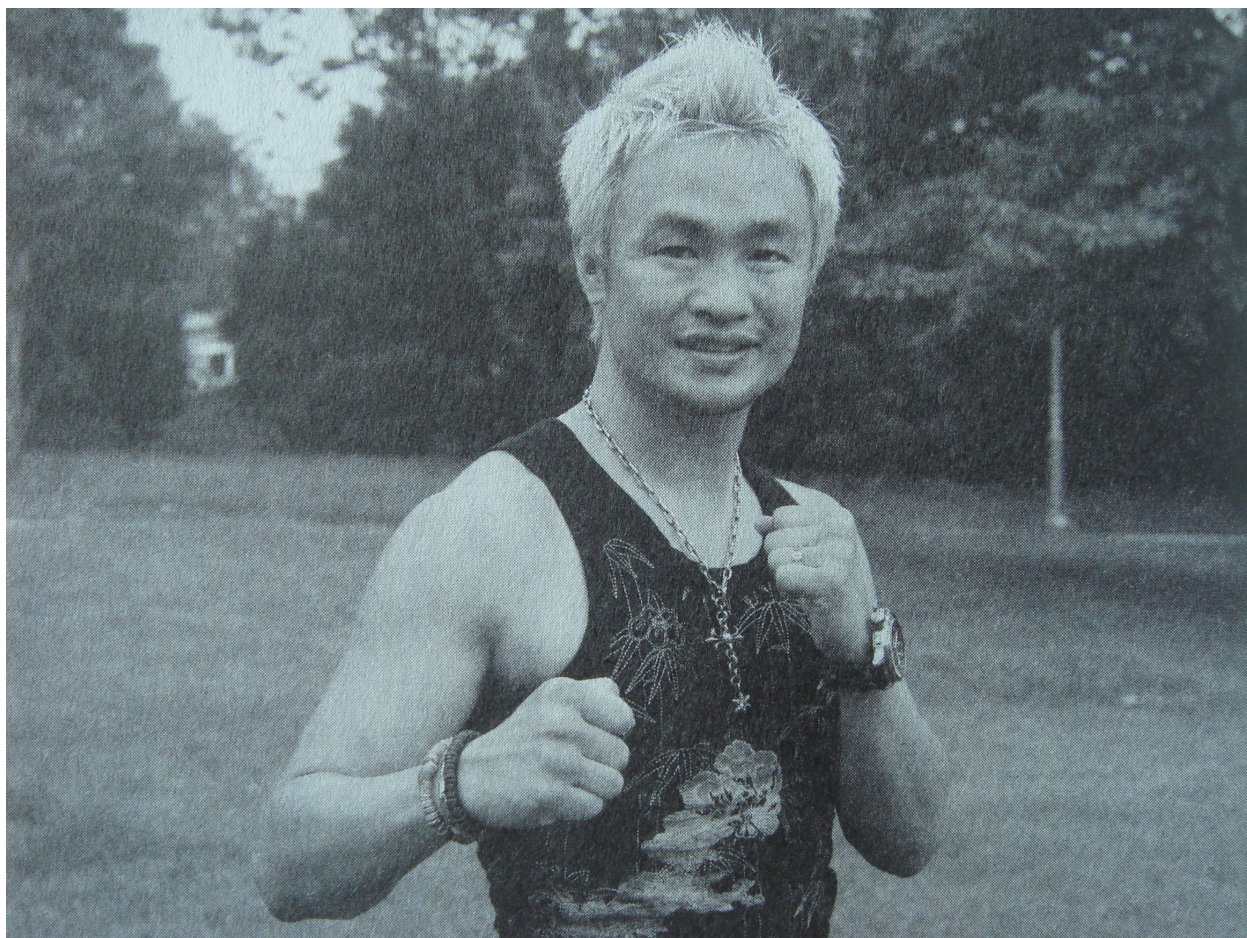


PHOTO – Former WBC world superflyweight champion Masamori Tokuyama. Retired in March 2007, but was rumored to fight Takanori Gomi at the end of 2006. Having retired, it would be easy for him to step into the ring of MMA or K-1 but..... Will Tokuyama ever return to the ring?

The same person mentioned previously stated, "Because I've heard that Tokuyama has a huge ego. I really think he wanted to do it." In actuality, it is a fact that Tokuyama was in negotiations, but his complaint was that the difference in weight (the fight contracts being made at the time included a weight difference of 20 kilograms) was too big.

This weight problem was an issue from the very start of negotiations. In PRIDE, the lowest weight class was lightweight, and taking into account name value, the only opponent for him would have been Gomi. But it is said that it would be under boxing rules, with four rounds, no decisions, and only a KO would result in a victor.

There was no way Tokuyama was going to do MMA. I am told that Gomi also expressed interest when presented with the offer, "a match in rules close to boxing." Everyone knows that Gomi was a boxing otaku. So while there was a weight difference, they were thinking to handicap that through the rules.

A bout featuring a boxing world champion would have been a dream for Gomi. As far as his level of popularity, too, he didn't want to lose out to the K-1 fighters, and his drive to be in the majors also must have been a spur.

Even with the terms he came with in his negotiations to fight, it is said that the negotiations were proceeding satisfactorily. "So, when do we make the official announcement?" The negotiations had gone that far. There was a

“signing bonus” that was going to be paid on the spot when he put his name on the contract. It had all gone that far.

Gomi vs. Takayama, looking certain of being made reality. But this supermatch suffered a setback. The reason for that was the difference in custom between the world of boxing and the world of MMA. Tokuyama, in negotiations with PRIDE, had told a reporter from Sports Tsuuchi of that fact.

In the world of Japanese MMA, it was normal for matchmaking and the appearance of new fighters to be held back until they were announced at an official announcement meeting (even if the fact was circulating on the internet as a rumor). But in boxing, even if it is just a fact that they are negotiating, that is made public. Even most recently, the failure to reach agreement for the Daisuke Naitou vs. Koki Kameda bout had also been reported on.

In the midst of those “cultural differences,” Tokuyama had talked to reporters about him being in negotiations with PRIDE. Of course, the reporters at Tsuuchi must have known PRIDE’s way of doing things, but at the time, PRIDE was refusing to let Tsuuchi cover its events, so there was a background where Tsuuchi did not really have to show restraint.

At the crucial moment, for it to go public, it obviously created an uproar in both industries. Because this wasn’t boxing negotiations - this was a champion boxer negotiating to go into another genre. The boxing world had

become really sensitive to the idea of their champions challenging themselves by going into K-1 or some other event and losing.

Further, this wasn't the case of a former champ, this was the reigning champion who was going to do it. It is said that the boxing commission stated, "If you are going to fight in PRIDE, you will have to relinquish the belt." Sports Tsuuchi also talked about "forfeiting his championship" and "actual retirement (from boxing)."

So, would it be a good thing for Tokuyama to forfeit his championship and retire from boxing in order to fight in PRIDE? Probably not. To look at it from PRIDE's point of view, the attraction to Tokuyama was not his name or even his ability but simply his title, "reigning world boxing champion." For "plain-old" Tokuyama to fight in PRIDE would not have been a big enough reason.

Even if he was to give up the belt at some point up until the day of the match, they would at least have to have him enter the press conferences as the champion. For all those reasons, the negotiations were being kept secret. And with Tokuyama's comments (with no bad intentions on his part), it fell apart.

Like this, the PRIDE bout featuring a reigning boxing champion became a phantom. Tokuyama on his blog wrote to everyone related to PRIDE, apologizing, "I delayed my decision until yesterday, causing much trouble to

you all." To Gomi and other PRIDE fighters, he wrote, "I respect all of you as warriors that fight in the ring like I do."

File 027

GSP, Anderson, Kimbo Slice – the big fish that PRIDE let get away

If one were asked what the biggest MMA event in the world is nowadays, the answer would no doubt be the UFC. It would be no problem saying that its credibility, popularity, and roster of fighters are all on a different level compared to other promotions. In that UFC, a fighter with skills rated above all others exists, and his name is Anderson Silva. With the nickname “The Spider,” the strikes he sends out with his long limbs are frightening for his opponents. These days, with his strength and seemingly no chinks in his armor, he is at the peak of his reign.

The fact that Silva had originally fought in PRIDE is a popular topic. After cinching the title in Shooto by defeating Hayato “Mach” Sakurai in 2001, he went to PRIDE the following year. His development saw him face Carlos Newton among others.

But then, Silva started doing what could even be considered straying off course. In November 2003, he broke away from his team, Chute Boxe, where Assuerio Silva had also been training. The cause for his departure seems to be, you could almost say “of course,” money. He had spoken badly about Chute Boxe head Fedimar, and of course Fedimar’s Chute Boxe fighters like Wanderlei Silva must have been enraged, thinking of Anderson and his people as traitors.

After that, Anderson appeared in the June 2004 Gladiator event in Korea under the team name MDT (Muay-thai Dream Team). He beat Jeremy Horn by decision. And in the December Otoko-matsuri of that year, he was submitted by Ryo Chonan with a heel hold (his affiliation for that event was “Brazilian Spider”). As it stands, this was his last match in Japan.

His participation in Gladiator and the Otoko-matsuri may have been his way of dealing with his multi-fight contract made when he was in Chute Boxe. In reality, Anderson had requested a single fight contract outside of Chute Boxe which PRIDE forcefully turned down.

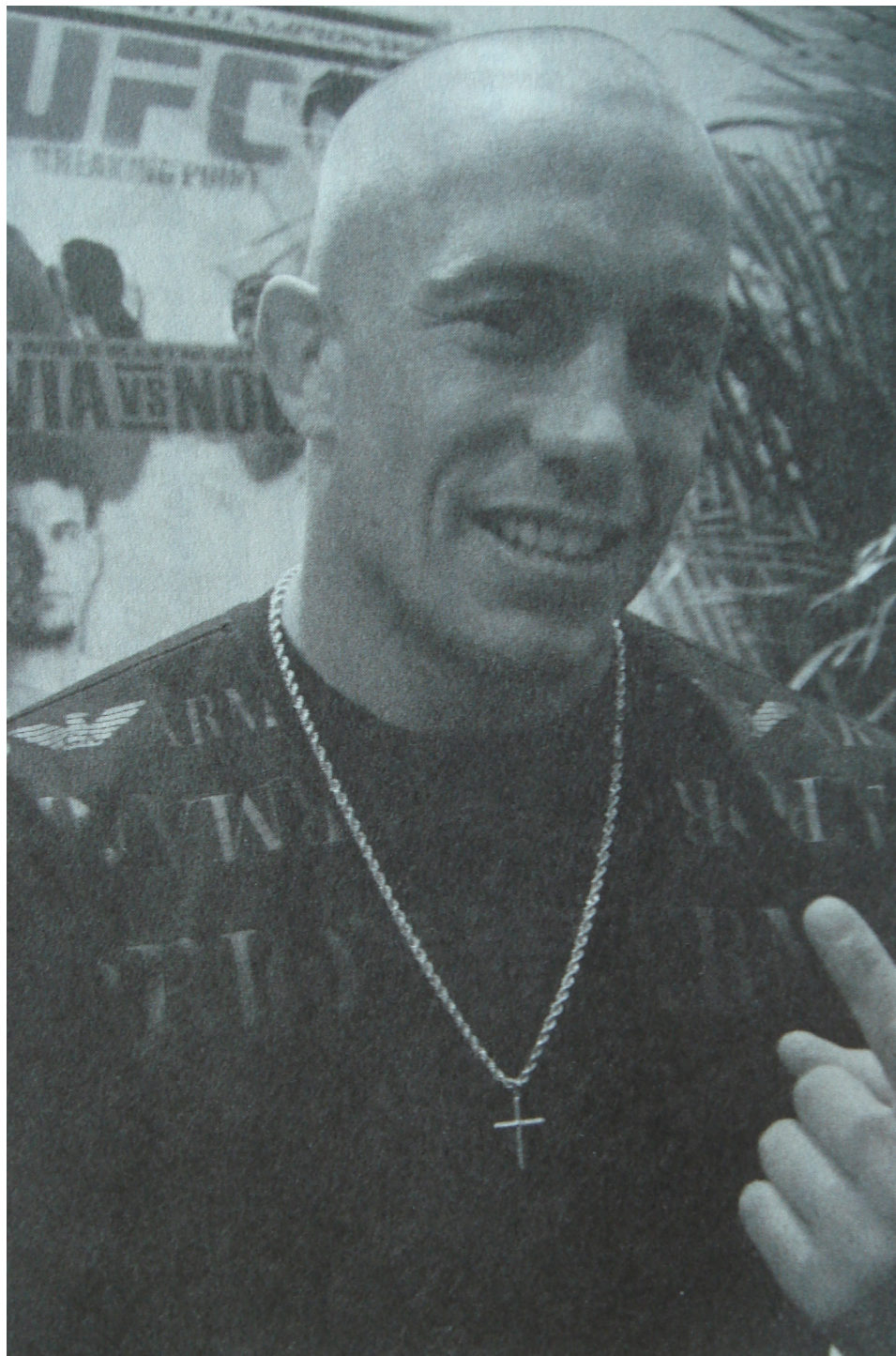


PHOTO – Showing fights at the forefront of MMA presently, MMA fighter GSP, UFC welterweight champion Georges St-Pierre. He didn't have a chance to fight in PRIDE, but will the chance come in the future to see GSP fight live in Japan?

The reason was simple. Anderson was a fighter that PRIDE had signed because of the fact that he was a Chute Boxe fighter. In other words, Fedimar's relationship of mutual trust was the biggest priority. To try to force a contract through with someone that was a traitor to Fedimar was not a good plan. And besides that, Wanderlei Silva, and the brothers Murilo Ninja and Mauricio Shogun were still in Chute Boxe, fighters combining popularity and real ability.

On the other side, Anderson had been beaten decisively by both Ryo Chonan and Daiju Takase. He had gotten a brilliant KO win over Carlos Newton, but his win over Alexander Otsuka had been by decision and that over Alex Stiebling was a TKO due to bleeding – this was not what could be called a remarkable showing that Anderson was making. Chute Boxe, with which PRIDE had had good relations for a long time and which held so many veteran and champion fighters – or – on the other side, someone you couldn't even call a top fighter, Anderson Silva. To try to balance them on the scales is unthinkable.

Like this, Anderson left the mats of Japan, and started to make his way on his own. This time it was Cage Force, next it was Rumble on the Rock, and then he arrived after a struggle at the UFC to meet his big break.

In reality, there was a guardian looking after him behind his lone row. That person was Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira. Anderson and Nogueira were brothers of might, friends that exchanged their knowledge about BJJ and

striking with each other. When Anderson declared independence, Nogueira was his back-up, and when Nogueira went to the UFC, Anderson who was already a top fighter there would help him with things like good octagon strategy.

Both having made their names in PRIDE, though with a rival relationship with Chute Boxe and Brazilian Top Team, they made the UFC their new home and had the championship belts wrapped around them..... what an unexpected drama.

And one more person, now the UFC's poster-boy, welterweight champion Georges St-Pierre (nickname GSP) also was connected with PRIDE. By some chance, this "ten years too early" man might have also become a PRIDE fighter.

The start of this was the director of promotional video creation and publicity for PRIDE in America at the time, who said, "I know a really tough Canadian fighter. He's good-looking, too." That fighter, of course, was Georges St-Pierre.

However, PRIDE's response to this was inadequate.

"Ah well, then for now just send him some of our materials."

A thin string connecting PRIDE and GSP had appeared, but there it ended. Perhaps the materials were sent, but it is said that it was not something the DSE staff were paying attention to.

This was back when Fuji was still broadcasting their events. PRIDE was not thinking anything of GSP, who was at the time in Japan (well, in the USA as well) nothing more than a nameless young fighter, and as well, he was also a welterweight for which PRIDE did not yet have a division, so they must have thought there was no reason to really try to connect with him.

If GSP had ended up fighting in PRIDE at this time, how would that have changed his future fate? And how would the history of MMA have changed? "GSP is a fighter suited to the cage. He would've lost in the ring." Those are the words of one related person.....

Anderson had shed off Chute Boxe, hence, he disappeared from PRIDE. But later, Wanderlei Silva and Shogun also left and went to the UFC. GSP, who PRIDE hadn't tried to make a relationship with, rapidly showed his true power in the octagon, rising to become a top star.

Of course, all of this prosperity wasn't just due to the UFC's power. If PRIDE hadn't ended, they wouldn't have been there. But, if they hadn't had explosive success in the UFC alongside its own onslaught advance (if they had moved from PRIDE to make DREAM or Sengoku their home), the category of

the middle and welterweight classes wouldn't be showered in the attention it receives now.

Lastly, there was one other person who was planned to fight in PRIDE, a very famous fighter in the USA. "The beast born on YouTube," Kimbo Slice. Kimbo got his break by uploading videos of his shameless backyard street fights to a website. Before he went big, in actuality, the American PRIDE staff had been looking at him.

And in the second Las Vegas PRIDE event in February 2007, his name was raised as one of the candidate fighters to appear. But in the end, it wasn't to be. The reason was that it had been decided for a black and beastly fighter just like him, Sokoudjou, to make his debut there. In other words, they were overlapping characters, and one had to go, so the no-name Kimbo lost the vote and Sokoudjou, whom Dan Henderson had recommended, won the right to fight.

In the Las Vegas event, Sokoudjou KO'd a real warrior in Antonio Rogerio Nogueira, getting his big break. Likewise, Kimbo's popularity on the internet exploded, ending with him becoming extremely famous before anyone knew what was happening. Kimbo Slice now has the highest TV viewership of any MMA fighter. If PRIDE had gotten him at this time, Kimbo coming into their hands at the same time as their sale to Lorenzo Fertitta..... Dana White might be angrily cursing that it didn't happen that way.

File 028

To fight against Fedor and Mirko as well – the Mike Tyson world tour

PRIDE, as has been described up until now, had been advancing with various plans under the surface of the water. So many disappeared right before they were going to be announced, but there were also many that naturally disappeared after the official announcement. The representative example of that being the plan for Mike Tyson to fight in PRIDE USA.

There was a skeptical mood surrounding this Tyson affair from the start. Before PRIDE, K-1 had also gotten in touch with him, and it is said that the prohibitive costs involved turned into the cause of the tax evasion scandal. But it wasn't just about seeing Tyson fight - PRIDE had also drawn up a dream plan that it had presented to Tyson. And in this dream, Tyson showed very much interest. This dream was for a "World Tour."

Getting in touch with Tyson was, for DSE, an essential side mission they wanted to succeed in at the same time as their move into America. To succeed in the states, just announcing the news, "Japan's biggest MMA event has

landed in America” would not make a sufficient impact. They needed something more riotous, a real draw that would surprise even the American media. DSE, thinking that, started looking toward Tyson, with his huge name value throughout the world and how he lost his position in the boxing world.

Of course, getting to Tyson did not go well at first. For someone that had become as famous as Tyson, naturally, there were lots of hangers-on. This included suspicious characters trying to make a lot of money off his name (without him able to do anything about it). DSE tried with a lot care to avoid those hangers-on, heading directly to who could be called Tyson’s #1 manager.

He could also be called the official ticket window to negotiations with Tyson. That said, it wasn’t that negotiations would proceed easily. Tyson had on his plate uncountable offers and business plans. That said, there were two reasons that in combination explained why DSE was succeeding in the negotiations – their persistent negotiating style and the fact that PRIDE’s name value was just starting to permeate the US at the time.



PHOTO – August 2006, the press conference in Los Angeles for the Las Vegas PRIDE event – Mike Tyson appeared! In the end, he didn't show his face at the crucial Las Vegas event and his connection to PRIDE was cut, but to see these three together in one photo even now has an intense impact.

Amidst this company-wide stormy passage, one man was described by another former DSE employee as, “amazing at charming the pants off of people,” and one day, that man announced, “I’ve gotten a talk with Mike!”

The first meeting between DSE president Sakakibara and Tyson took place in April of 2006. The location – China. During Tyson’s imprisonment following the rape incident, he came upon a Mao Zedong book and was so inspired by it that he went so far as to get a tattoo of his portrait. In China, Tyson’s land of infatuation, Sakakibara’s killing words were, “building a world tour.”

Tyson was a big fan of MMA from the start. He had even worn a Vitor Belfort t-shirt at a meeting with reporters. That said, MMA wasn’t the kind of world you could go into with limited training and put on a good match against a PRIDE fighter. As well, Tyson had had his license suspended by the athletic commission in the state in which PRIDE’s push-into-America event would take place (Nevada state). Because of his arrest history, it would also have been difficult for him to go to Japan.

There, what Sakakibara came up with was “building a world tour.” The bout format would be boxing. His opponents would be Mirko Crocop, Fedor Emelianenko and other PRIDE fighters with high level striking. It was a major plan for a circuit of events with those kinds of draws happening in China,

Russia and Europe. Not to advance Tyson in the US but a “world strategy” trump card.

Japan, having come all this way at its own pace, the United States that it will battle in the future. Not in either of them, but in lands yet to experience MMA, those were where Tyson’s value lived. That is what Sakakibara was thinking.

And along with the advance using Tyson as the main draw, use the appeal of the PRIDE fighters, connecting it to show how interesting MMA is – they would be grabbing success in an area into which the UFC had yet to venture.

Being paid special attention was the idea of breaking into and moving deeper into the new and important private sector market of China. Thinking of that huge population, the scale of business if they became a hit even once is unfathomable. Not to mention China being a land related to Tyson, Sakakibara must have felt rather good prospects of victory.

They were thinking, if possible, to put the first event of the world tour on that year at the earliest. And the place to hold it was, planned to happen at the same time as the Saitama Super Arena New Year’s Eve event, Macao (it is now the largest casino city in the world, excepting Las Vegas).

As would be expected from the people that had made Takada vs. Rickson happen, this was a huge-scale dreamtale. And it resonated with Tyson. "Like Mao Zedong, needled into Tyson's body, or like Che Guevara, let's wake a revolution on the world stage!" Sakakibara's plan had gone beyond business, it was positively dreamlike.

But there is a paper-thin difference between dreamlike and reckless. At the American press conference in August for the PRIDE Las Vegas show, Tyson appeared as, "one PRIDE member we are happy has joined us," but there were absolutely no developments after that. At the actual event in October, he was nowhere to be found.

Questions were raised at the event and at the press conference the day after the event concerning this matter, but DSE never gave a clear answer on it. To say what really happened, Tyson himself just decided to cancel. The reason for not appearing at the event, "my daughter's illness." It is said that no matter how much the DSE staff tried to persuade him, Tyson should shook his head no.

As for Tyson, this sort of thing was a pretty much everyday occurrence. When he went to the K-1 event in Las Vegas as well, getting called out by Bob Sapp, when he was about to head to the event from his hotel room, it is said that he started whining, "Nah, I don't wanna go."

Of course, DSE actually had an official contract with him. If there was any breach of that contract, naturally, there would be a monetary penalty. Tyson paid it no mind. One of the original DSE employees stated:

“Tyson has enormous debts. He has broken a number of contracts up until now. So, his debts just from contract-breaching fees are up to some tens of millions of yen [= hundreds of thousands of dollars], nothing can be said.”

Tyson, said to have millions of yen in debts. And it seems he didn't care about adding millions more on top of that. It is said, “If you pass a hundred million in debts, they become assets,” maybe this is what Tyson was thinking.

To get Tyson, to build a world tour, just as it looks, it ended as a dreamtale. And for PRIDE after that, there came a crisis in which they couldn't even think about Tyson or anything else.....

File 029

The lost dream object – Kazushi Sakuraba vs. Kiyoshi Tamura

In the spring of 2007, it was announced that PRIDE would be purchased by American capital.

On April 8th, PRIDE 34 was held under the reins of DSE, and to PRIDE president Nobuyuki Sakakibara, it was the last event ever to be held. After this event, the management of a new company, "PRIDE FC WORLDWIDE," was decided; however, this tournament was without doubt a great turning point for PRIDE. To say nothing of the fact that this year was the tenth year - a memorial year - since the founding of PRIDE.

"I want fans to be able to feel these ten years of PRIDE history. I want this event to have the significance of inviting people to reflect on these ten years." Sakakibara thinking like this, started working to realize a certain match-up for the event. Yes, Sakuraba vs. Tamura. Starting with Takada vs. Rickson, even this big-time promoter who had put together many great fights, failed to realize this one fight. In short, the Sakuraba vs. Tamura fight was a "lost dream."

Sakuraba had suddenly moved to HERO'S the previous year. And PRIDE and HERO'S had no connections at the time. Even so, if one gives more than a passing thought to the ten years of PRIDE, Sakuraba's existence was completely essential.

Sakuraba himself felt the same way. At the meeting for his switchover to HERO'S, he said, "I want to be a bridge-builder between PRIDE and HERO'S." When Sakuraba met with Sakakibara after a long time not seeing him, he said, "I'll even fight for free. I'll face any opponent." Sakakibara then started working to bring Sakuraba into the PRIDE ring once again. He started petitioning FEG's representative Sadaharu Tanikawa, who manages HERO'S, day after day. Certainly, Tanikawa was the leader of a rival organization, but he also had involvement in PRIDE originally.

He was making adjustments in every thinkable way, towards the HERO'S broadcaster TBS, sponsors, etc., on a mission that, "Sakuraba vs. Tamura is a match-up that should be done at PRIDE."

Tamura too had strong feelings for PRIDE. After the purchase of PRIDE and the resignation of Sakakibara, Tamura said the following: "First, I want to tell Mr. Sakakibara, 'Thank you for all your hard work!' It is not a matter of feeling happy that there's a new organization that can give birth to new possibility. That is for the future, so before that, saying these words to Sakakibara comes first."



PHOTO - Believe it or not, Sakuraba who, about one year ago transferred from PRIDE to HERO'S is returning home! And more, finally stepping up together with Tamura Kiyoshi. Now, PRIDE 34 would be the final event, but in continuation of the dream, Sakuraba vs. Tamura was made reality in the 2008 New Year's Eve Dynamite!! ring!

However, of course the Sakuraba vs. Tamura fight was not immediately settled. A terribly important fight, and while understanding Sakakibara's feelings all too well, Tamura had problems giving an answer. He didn't have enough preparation time for the fight. Sakuraba's participation had been confirmed, and Tamura received the offer ten days before the event. And on the other hand, another opponent was being prepared to face Sakuraba. Wanderlei Silva. Sakuraba had fought against him 3 times and lost each time. While they were so-called sworn enemies, by fighting, they both had contributed to building the history of PRIDE, and there was also the fact that around this time, Sakuraba had been visiting Chute Boxe to train⁹⁸, making them almost teammates.

If this fight were to be realized, it would be symbolic of "ten years of PRIDE." Sakuraba vs. Silva was planned to be a secret match. For that purpose, a PRIDE-style explosive intro video was made. Director Daisuke Satou searched for "local material" in Brazil for that purpose. After the February Las Vegas event, losing to Dan Henderson, Silva returned to the gym.

The gym was packed with students waiting for him. "Even if he were to lose his belt, Wanderlei is our hero." To convey this, they all gathered to wait for Silva's arrival. From this impressive sight, we move to the intro screen for "Wanderlei Silva vs. X." And then after Silva, in costume, had entered the ring, Sakuraba made his entry to "SPEED TK remix," and they touched gloves.....

That was the extraordinary surprise fight entrance the staff had thought up.

⁹⁸ Degeiko - giving lessons at pupils' homes, going to train in a sumo stable other than your own

However, this too became impossible to put into action. Silva got KO'd and lost in February, and was in a period of suspension according to the rules of the athletic commission of Nevada state. "PRIDE 34" was an event held in Japan, but of course it was broadcast in the USA as well.

As a group now formed on American capital, they must have sought to more and more promote the advancement of the "home country."

So no matter the fact that this event was to be held in Japan, there was no way they were going to ignore the rules of the athletic commission and force through the plan to have Silva enter the ring.

So in this way, both Sakuraba vs. Tamura and Sakuraba vs. Silva disappeared.

There was also a rumor that an originally eager Tamura heard rumors of the Silva fight, and then decided to "step down." But everything didn't end there with just that. "Even if it's for no money, won't you step into the ring with me?" Can't we give them the surprise of Sakuraba's homecoming along with Sakuraba and Tamura standing in the same ring together: the "place of dreams?"

They were able to continue the negotiations almost until completion, owing to the zeal put into this last DSE event.

And then...

Tamura's appearance in the ring was decided the day before the event. Considering that Tamura had rejected the Sakuraba fight again and again, Tamura must have needed to build a lot of determination to make the decision to go in there together with him. Even so, on that day, Tamura did step into the ring, and met with Sakakibara and Sakuraba.

Sakuraba had informed Sakakibara that he would be entering the ring wearing a mask. The reason was not a political thing like, that as a contracted fighter for HERO'S, he couldn't reveal his face in the ring. It is said that Sakuraba told Sakakibara the following: "I know I will start crying, so I want to wear a mask." Sakakibara then commented, "I think Sakuraba was anxious. Likely, there would be fans who thought that he had changed sides to HERO'S and perhaps a judge would freak out and yell "GO HOME!" But, I said the following, "Hey, PRIDE is the house that you made, isn't it? So when you return everyone will definitely greet you with a "welcome home."

File 30

Even now it's moving under the water!? The PRIDE rebirth project

This book has presented a number of previously unknown big plans that PRIDE had. But no matter how many dreamtales we dig back up, it is like counting the age of a child that died, but because PRIDE's dreams were so big, it is certain that we can feel the void left in its absence.

PRIDE, in the possession of Lorenzo Fertitta, quietly imprisoned. But moves to bring PRIDE back are happening. What "PRIDE: Secret Files" will present last is that plan to bring back PRIDE.

2008, the subprime loan problem, the Lehman Brothers failure, the decisive start of the global financial crisis. The sports world as well, with the epicenter in America, seems to have suffered serious effects.

For example, Major League Baseball (MLB). The owners of MLB teams have been switching rapidly after only short spans. And those owners are

mostly people from the financial world. The buying and selling of teams has become a form of “speculation.”

Different from the teams in Japan and Korea, in the MLB, the team names like the Chicago Cubs and Boston Red Sox don't include the name of their parent company, so there is no problem doing that. The teams' history and culture is kept as it is, and at the same time, they fill in the lineup to raise the value so they can sell it at a higher price, so there is nothing particularly bad about it.

But this kind of speculation is exactly the main thing behind the financial crisis of this time. Circumstances in which the owners lose capital and become unable to find new buyers are not unforeseeable. The money for new stadiums and construction costs and lesser gate revenue are surely choking the teams.



PHOTO – The event put on to diffuse⁹⁹ PRIDE, the 2007 “Yarennoka! New Year’s Eve Oomisoka¹⁰⁰! 2007.” It was at the same time, however, a one-day-only return of PRIDE. We want to see Yarennoka! make a second event and the return of PRIDE.

⁹⁹ Sankai – disperse, diffuse, scatter, make pervasive, etc.

¹⁰⁰ Oomisoka – New Year’s Eve

It can be said that it is not only baseball but many sports genres that are moving into such circumstances. And the leading power in the MMA world, the UFC, is surely no different.

These days, the UFC is receiving songs of praise from the world. The venues for every event are completely packed. But what will happen to that in the future, nobody knows. Watching sports is, to the end, a form of leisure, and if the people close their purse strings, that will directly affect the live gate and PPV revenues. And one more serious problem is the operation of the parent company, Station Casinos.

As an example, even for a top-class enterprise, if its stock price suddenly falls, the company cannot simply peacefully relax. On the contrary according to one report, Affliction's vice-president Tom Atencio, who it is said is in the hole almost \$50 million, was saying, "Station Casinos will go bankrupt in February 2009." If so, and the operations need to be downsized, it wouldn't be strange at all if they let go of the UFC. Yes, sell the UFC.

Already, influential American television station FOX TV made an offer near 100 billion yen [roughly \$1 billion USD] to purchase the UFC, but it was turned down. But for the UFC, which is leading the way in the world of MMA, a successful buyer may surely come along. Purchase doesn't mean the UFC would go away. But for that reason, the UFC cannot hold any bad debts internally. And PRIDE would certainly be such.

Spring of 2006, PRIDE was sold to Lorenzo Fertitta. From there, transfer of control and operations progressed with a new company, PRIDE FC WORLDWIDE, taking on the administrative role. But in August of the same year, the Japanese offices were suddenly locked up. And from there, PRIDE went into hibernation.

In reality, transfer of operations from DSE to PRIDE FC has still not been completed. The base for this is that the new company took its hand out of the Japanese market. It is also not the case that the sale price was paid in full to former owner DSE's president Nobuyuki Sakakibara. On the contrary, the American and Japanese sides are now locked in a legal battle over this transfer of operations.

The root cause for the litigation started by the UFC side is that the Japanese side has been uncooperative in the transfer. Or to put it simply, it not cooperating in the background check required for the enterprise to function is the reason for the lawsuit.

The decision from the court has yet to come out. Or rather, the UFC is holding it internally. Given that, PRIDE is basically a completely inactive lower part of the company. If that is so, it would make the most sense to just get rid of it. To put the UFC into even better sale condition than it is, as is described above, they should first sell PRIDE. That rumor has taken wings in the industry.

And if PRIDE is to be sold, it would without doubt end up in Japanese hands. Because it is the Japanese MMA fans that have continually loved PRIDE and it is Japan that knows PRIDE's worth.

From the financial crisis, the UFC as well may receive significant damage. It may go beyond them selling PRIDE or even then selling the UFC. Even though they have been at the top in the industry, the American market will shrink. And then, as a result, the fighters' money will drop.

When that happens, what decisions will the fighters make. Especially, the original PRIDE fighters who loved the Japanese ring and who were loved by the Japanese fans, but who had to make the tough decision to move to the UFC.....

Once again, the powerful fighters will return to fight in events in Japan. From here, will that really happen. The dream of PRIDE's return, not in the too-far distant future, may just become reality.

The saying, "no one knows what the future holds" also of course applies to the world of MMA. What will that world be like in 2009, nobody knows. But for Japanese MMA, a ray of great joy may await.

This book dealt with a number of "phantom plans" related to PRIDE. But we are only praying that this last section alone does not become a "phantom"

The secret dream held by the MMA event DEEP

Shigeru Saeki – DEEP President

“Minoru Suzuki vs. Kiyoshi Tamura had been finalized for
the Ryogoku Kokugikan”



PHOTO – Shigeru Saeki. Born June 24, 1969, Toyama prefecture. While publishing an information magazine in Nagoya, he worked in pro-wrestling promotion, and started the MMA event DEEP in 2001. Later, while continuing DEEP, he worked in PR for PRIDE, promoted in U-STYLE, etc., his activity far-ranging. Recently, he was hired as supervisor for the women’s MMA event JEWELS. 170 cm, 110 kg.

Interviewer: Saeki, this is an interview for a book on PRIDE.

Saeki: What kind of book?

Interviewer: It investigates and puts out to the public the unpublished plans in PRIDE's ten-year history. And I would like you to tell us some of the buried secrets in DEEP's history. DEEP must also have many plans that were never publicized?

Saeki: Yes. DEEP has put on 38 main events, and including things like grappling events and club DEEP and all of that, we've put on close to 100 events.

Interviewer: That much, wow!

Saeki: As well, it is not a half-assed number of fights we put into one event. So, sorry to say, but it's at a completely different level than PRIDE's ten years!

Interviewer: Dahahaha! Certainly looking at the number of fights, DEEP runs circles around PRIDE.

Saeki: Because we have showmen and novices alike stepping into the ring! Eheheh.

Interviewer: I don't think that's exactly a point to brag about (laughing). So, when DEEP first raised its flag, what was the plan originally?

Saeki: The flag was hoisted on January 8, 2001 at the Aichi prefecture gymnasium, with the original plan being to do a pro-wrestling festival.

Interviewer: Ehh, not MMA (laughing)?

Saeki: At that time, there was no event like WRESTLE 1 these days where a number of pro-wrestlers from different organizations could all gather in one places to do a huge event. So, I was thinking about things like Nobuhiko Takada vs. Cactus Jack, or NO FEAR (Yoshihiro Takayama and Takao Oomori) vs. the Road Warriors.

Interviewer: You had dreams!

Saeki: I had had talks about it with Yuji Shimada. He said, "Takada is coming to hear what I have to say!" He also talked about getting a number of guys to come from the WWE to talk.

Interviewer: Shimada's really helpful (laughing).

Saeki: Yeah, yeah. But the talks didn't progress, and then came talk down a different route to use Brazilian athletes with Royler (Gracie), and I had connections with Pancrase and it came to be that I could also use Pancrase fighters, so I made it an MMA event.

Interviewer: So that event was... putting on an MMA event wasn't a dream of yours?

Saeki: I wanted to put on my own event, but it wasn't at all like, "it must be MMA." At the start I wasn't so knowledgeable about MMA, I was kind of like, what's Shooto? I barely knew even of Hayato "Mach" Sakurai.

Interviewer: You seemed to know El Canek's¹⁰¹ greatness more than Mach's greatness (laughing).

Saeki: Yea, that's the way it is, right. In the world, Canek's the one that's famous. Because he's the Mexican legend! (showing pride)

Interviewer: That's talking about the world of pro-wrestling, though (laughing).

Saeki: So at the beginning I relied on others to a degree for the matchmaking, when it made sense.

Interviewer: When it made sense (laughing).

Saeki: In there, I had some good fights I thought I made like Tachihikari vs. Kengo.

Interviewer: I don't understand your standards for a good match (laughing).

Saeki: So, for the start, one phantom bout, a special match or something related to Kengo, I had Kengo vs. Animal Warrior set.

¹⁰¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Canek

Interviewer: Kengo vs. Animal!

Saeki: That fell apart and it ended up Kengo vs. Dos Caras, Jr., but the results were good.

Interviewer: Why did Kengo vs. Animal fall through?

Saeki: The negotiations with Animal. Pancrase was OK though.

Interviewer: You got the "go" sign for Kengo vs. Tachihikari so Animal would've been okay, too, right.

Saeki: Speaking of that, for the third event, Tachihikari vs. Dos Caras, Jr. had been set. But Caras got injured, and when I suddenly had to go calling out for someone to replace him, a Mexican agent had raised El Canek's name.

Interviewer: So that's how Tachihikari vs. Canek came to be?

Saeki: Right. But when I first heard Canek's name, I thought, "There's no way he'll do MMA." I mean, at the time he was like close to 50.

Interviewer: Even if he made it to Japan, he would've deserted under enemy fire like Tatsumi Fujinami (laughing).

Saeki: But he really came to Japan. Because former boxing world champ Victor Rabanales who had just beat Tatsuyoshi (Joichirou)¹⁰² had also come at that time.

Interviewer: He came... Rabanales. Getting a boxing champion is unexpected, was that because you were going down the Lucha route?

Saeki: Right. Rabanales was also Mexican. Mexico has like the same organization for both boxing and Lucha Libre, all the athletes have to get the same license. And the organization that issues that license, their president is El Fantasma.

Interviewer: Ahh, he was in Japan before, in a purple mask, a luchador at the first UWF.

Saeki: Yeah, really, he's mafia, that guy.

Interviewer: Dahahahaha! The kinds of things you're spilling.

Saeki: Fantasma came along with Canek to Japan. But the first time he saw MMA, he was freaking out. But Canek got the win, right. That's one of the best bouts in DEEP history!

Interviewer: DEEP's best bout is Canek vs. Tachihikari!? (laughing)

¹⁰² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joichiro_Tatsuyoshi

Saeki: Even now there has been nothing like it. During the match while he was put in a rear naked choke, he was appealing to the ref, saying, "Referee, choke, choke!" (laughing).

Interviewer: He mistook it for pro-wrestling (laughing). Certainly it has name appeal but do you really want to put that as the best bout?

Saeki: There's nothing else, right! After that would only be the golden fight of Takumi Yano vs. Brazo de Plata¹⁰³.

Interviewer: Not that kind of golden fight (laughing), were there any real dream matches that ended as phantoms?

Saeki: There are some, the biggest among them that came really within a hair of being made reality was Minoru Suzuki vs. Kiyoshi Tamura.

Interviewer: A huge match with a connection to UWF. To make it happen, didn't you put in money for the Ryogoku Kokugikan¹⁰⁴?

PHOTO – To speak of DEEP, Saeki's personal matchmaking idea for luchadors to challenge themselves under Vale Tudo rules. But that personal

¹⁰³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/José_Alvarado_Nieves

¹⁰⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryōgoku_Kokugikan

matchmaking concept ended up seeing Dos Caras, Jr. also become a star, appearing in PRIDE.

Saeki: Yeah. I did that thinking of making a huge event in December of 2001, the year we hoisted the DEEP flag. That same day I made the Sanae Kikuta matchup against Abu Dhabi champion Ricardo Arona. But Arona went to PRIDE and that was that. But as for Minoru Suzuki vs. Tamura, that really had made it right up to point just before the official announcement, but due to various circumstances, it didn't happen.

Interviewer: Whose various circumstances?

Saeki: Well, the red one (laughing). I think the statute of limitations is up, though.

Interviewer: So, Suzuki was into it?

Saeki: Into it, completely.

Interviewer: But at that time, Suzuki had barely done any Vale Tudo, right. But, if it was going to be Kiyoshi Tamura then he would do it?

Saeki: Yeah. But because of that I got connected to Suzuki and he went into our fourth event.

Interviewer: The legendary Minoru Suzuki vs. El Solar match, right (laughing).

Saeki: Yeah, and after that, Suzuki went on to face Liger¹⁰⁵ in Pancrase. So, fighting against masked men is Suzuki's specialty.

Interviewer: Not exactly a specialty (laughing).

Saeki: Also with the connection to Suzuki, I wanted to make Wataru Sakata vs. Suzuki happen. Sakata had been provoking Suzuki, it seemed that their paths should cross, so I thought it was interesting. But getting RINGS and Pancrase to work, I encountered a lot of problems, and it never happened. And along with that, there were talks of Yoshiki Takahashi vs. Wataru Sakata. Masakatsu Funaki was pushing that.

Interviewer: Lead by Funaki?

Saeki: Late one night, Yoshiki Takahashi and Funaki were drinking, and made a call to my place saying, "Make it."

Interviewer: Dahahahaha! Two words, "make it." (laughing).

Saeki: And I thought it was interesting so I decided to run with it, but in the end, Ozaki (Pancrase president) opposed it and that was that.

¹⁰⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jushin_Liger

Interviewer: Putting together matches that cross over organizations is difficult.

Saeki: At the same time, I was making moves towards Ikuhisa Minowa vs. Tatsuhiro Takaiwa¹⁰⁶.

Interviewer: Where did that come from?

Saeki: From me being tight with Takaiwa. Minowa went for a piledriver in his fight against Paulo Filho, and said things like, "Next, I'll do a death valley bomb," and if you think of the death valley bomb, you think of Takaiwa, right?

Interviewer: A fight based on the gimmick of a death valley bomb? (laughing)

Saeki: Takaiwa said he wanted to do it, and there were talks with ZERO-ONE, but at the very very end, it didn't work out.

Interviewer: Besides Takaiwa and the luchadors, were there any other pro-wrestlers you wanted to get to do it?

Saeki: Pro-wrestlers, eh? A lot of them did it. Even Nise Oonita (Toshiyuki Moritani).

Interviewer: That's a bit boring, I wouldn't think to put that on (laughing).

¹⁰⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatsuhiro_Takaiwa

Saeki: We must've been the only ones trying to get Nise Oonita into MMA.
Naoji Sano was crazy about it.

Interviewer: He didn't have to get crazy about that (laughing).

Saeki: (ignoring) Also, Shouichi Ichimiya appeared, Azteca, Stalker Ichikawa¹⁰⁷, (Gorgeous) Matsuno, too!

Interviewer: You don't have to be so proud.

Saeki: When Azteca came in and fought against Ichimiya, I had Matsuno go into the press conference wearing his mask. I had him saying, "Greetings, I am Azteca." (laughing)

Interviewer: Is that because it would've been in the pain in the ass to call Azteca, who lives in Kyushu, to the press conference?

Saeki: Yeah, yeah (laughing). And it costs money.

Interviewer: It was a doppelganger conference.

Saeki: And the substance of the conference was Matsuno. So making him into the double, I asked Azteca to loan me the mask but he made me buy one! It was a money loss venture.

Interviewer: Ahh, it couldn't be helped (laughing), right.

¹⁰⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalker_Ichikawa

Saeki: And also that guy seemed he was going to fight. Ebes-san (now, Kikutarou).

Interviewer: Ebes-san!? Now that you mention it, I heard also that he was supposed to fight Alistair Overeem at the 2003 Inoki-matsuri.

Saeki: Yeah, yeah. From that, it seems.

Interviewer: But, why him?

Saeki: Well just, I wonder how strong he is.

Interviewer: Normally, seeing Ebes-san's comedy pro-wrestling, you don't think, "I wonder how strong he is." (laughing). Even then, a lot of independents, eh.

Saeki: A lot of the majors are a pain in the ass, so I don't even want to talk with them. But with independents, you can get talks moving quickly, right? And I think there were also talks that Rongai Nosawa¹⁰⁸ would also fight.

PHOTO – Called an MMA toy chest, lining up interesting matchmaking, DEEP was selling fights with famous Japanese men. From this, Kiyoshi Tamura vs. Ikuhisa Minowa (Minowaman), the organizations over-the-top matchmaking is even now its specialty.

¹⁰⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazushige_Nosawa

Interviewer: It's always that kind of thing with you (laughing). Anything MMA-ish that was really like "This!"?

Saeki: Hmmm, there were talks of Yuki Kondo vs. Mach.

Interviewer: That is a good match. Mach was also at 83 kg when he started in PRIDE Bushido so maybe under a middleweight contract.

Saeki: I'm pretty sure this is because Kondo said he wanted to do it. After the day he had fought Josh Barnett at the Ryogoku, we had a meal together and he told me.

Interviewer: Were there moves to make it happen?

Saeki: No.

Interviewer: No? (laughing)

Saeki: It seemed it was going to be a pain in the ass to put together. When you realize the reality of the situation, you don't go overboard with effort.

Interviewer: You mean you can tell which fights can be put together and which ones can't.

Saeki: So the independents are the best. Ohh! (abruptly) there was another, another! The Cobra!

Interviewer: The Cobra, you mean George Takano¹⁰⁹?

Saeki: Yeah! I was thinking of putting on George Takano vs. Kim Duk.

Interviewer: Where did that idea come from?

Saeki: Nah, I just thought it was interesting.

Interviewer: Well, it certainly is interesting (laughing).

Saeki: Hey, it's interesting, right? We got in touch with Kim Duk. He came to see us once. But George Takano was a no-go. "I won't do it."

Interviewer: Recently, those kinds of DEEP-ish cards have gotten fewer, haven't they?

Saeki: To a degree, we have gone the MMA route. Those were different times. Back in the day, if a pro-wrestler went into MMA and lost, he was blamed like, "why did he lose!?" but now it's backwards, "there's no way he's going to win," so it's a bit different. But after all, even MMA is entertainment in the end. Beyond winning and losing, there's pro-wrestling spirits, I think showing the pro-wrestling feeling is important.

Interviewer: So, from now, is there a fight you'd particularly like to put on?

¹⁰⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Takano

Saeki: If we are talking about ones I want to put on that I also can put on, I've mostly made the moves already. I want to see Masakatsu Funaki vs. Minoru Suzuki, but that would be better for DREAM to do. Also, when Ryo Chonan returns home from the UFC, I'd like to see him rematch Mach. Also, more than fights I want, it's money I want (laughing).

Interviewer: Money over dream fights (laughing)?

Saeki: Because I mostly already put on my dream fights. And so my money disappeared, so the real problem is, I want money!

Interviewer: Thank you for the talk without any dreams, about DEEP, an organization flooded in dreams (laughing).



PRIDE FOREVER

To be continued..... ?

PRIDE – Secret Files – 30 Sealed Plans





PRIDE

機密ファイル

kamipro編集部 編

封印された30の計画

PRIDEを買収したロレンゾ・フェッティータの野望/幻となったMMAワールドシリーズ構想/DREAMは「PRIDEライト級GP 2008」から生まれた/「PRIDE.1」は高田vsヒクソン、桜庭vsヘンゾだった/高田vsヒクソンの前座に前田日明登場!/?長州力、橋本真也、船木誠勝の参戦計画/ホイスvsケアー消滅の裏側/PRIDEが小錦獲得に動いた!/?高田延彦引退試合の相手は小川か吉田だった/PRIDEに“赤いパンツのタイガーマスク”登場/桑田佳祐vs小堀剛がPRIDEで実現?/早すぎたリアリティショー計画/ミルコへの宣戦布告だったミルコvsヒーリング/曙に対抗する“地球”ホリフィールド/大晦日に「サクマシン」デビュー/PRIDEとUFC、本当の関係/幻のUFC日本進出計画とミルコとの関係/“皇帝”ヒョードルを二度破った男/ハイアンvsミルコ/トボクセの仁義なき闘い/永田裕志が高田延彦にガチンコ挑戦状/PRIDE武士道は“PRIDEサバイバル”だった/アル・マスカラスによる横やり/ビッグバン・ペイダーのPRIDE参戦/中軽量級は「武士道」存亡の危機から生まれた/「武士道」日本テレビで放映計画/タイソンvsミルコ、ヒョードル、ゲイラ/実現寸前だった五味隆典vsボクシング世界王者・徳山/GSP、キンボ・スライスはPRIDEに上がるはずだった/最後の夢 桜庭和志vs田村潔司

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